

RICHARD M. GIBSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This interview has not been edited by Mr. Gibson]

Q: Today is the 14th of January, 1998. This is an interview with Richard M. Gibson. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy and Dick and I are friends. Dick, could you tell me when and where you were born and something about your family?

GIBSON: I was born on May 11, 1942 in Miami, Florida. At the time, my father was in the Navy and he was stationed in Florida in flight training of some sort. I am not sure what kind of training it was. He met my mother, who worked at a hospital, and they got married. I was born and about three months later we all moved to California by car. My mom and I stayed with my father's parents when my father went off to the South Pacific for the war. He was a naval aviator.

Q: How long were you in California?

GIBSON: From then until I grew up. Basically, I grew up in California.

Q: Where did you grow up in California?

GIBSON: Mainly in San Diego. Wait a minute. Boy, this is interesting. I know you are going to edit this so you don't care how distorted it seems but come to think of it, after the war my dad was posted or assigned to Norfolk, Virginia to a naval air station. We moved back to Norfolk, Virginia. My earliest recollection of life really are basically from Norfolk, Virginia where I went to first and second grade. We left Norfolk, Virginia in 1950 when my dad was medically discharged from the Navy. At the time he was a warrant officer and he had suffered kidney damage in Guadalcanal. He died within five years of being discharged in '55.

In 1950 we all hopped in the car again and we drove back to California. This time I had a little sister as well. We grew up then in Southern California. We moved first to Los Angeles and stayed with my dad's parents for a while. Then he got a job in San Diego in the government working for a naval electronics laboratory doing electronics research so we all moved down to San Diego. I grew up in San Diego and graduated from high school.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

GIBSON: Actually it's in San Diego County. If you go to the east county, there is a town called El Cajon which is the second largest city in the county. We moved out there, bought a house and that's where I grew up. I went to a high school called Grossmont High School.

Q: You were certainly near the border. Was there a Mexican influence at all while you were there?

GIBSON: I can remember in junior high and in high school having Mexican American buddies but we were sort of like school buddies. There didn't seem to be that large of a Mexican American population at the time and the Mexican guys were sort of in a pretty small minority. I think there's a lot more there today but I don't remember much. There were Mexican restaurants and there were a lot of Spanish language words in the vocabulary. We all learned a little bit of Spanish and that sort of thing but there wasn't really a powerful influence.

Q: Were you getting any touch of international affairs while you were in high school?

GIBSON: No. The only touch of it I had was I got interested in judo and I took judo for a while in high school. My instructor was a Japanese American from Hawaii. Actually he was born in Japan, had immigrated to Hawaii and had then come to San Diego. That was my only other, besides the slight Mexican influence, foreign influence that I can recall.

Q: What were your interests in high school other than girls?

GIBSON: Cars.

Q: But you're from California. When I was in the Air Force, I remember, we talked about girls but the guys from California talked about cars.

GIBSON: That was the big thing, it was cars. All of my buddies, we all had old clunkers and we would rotate from one guys driveway to the next fixing the car on sort of a routine basis. As one would break we would fix it and then the next one would break. I used to keep crashing my gear box when dragging on the streets, which was illegal, of course, but we had lot of fun and we all did it. It was mainly a car culture, and camping and scouting. I spent a lot of time with scouting explorers and we spent a lot of time in the back country camping in the desert and hiking in the high Sierras.

Q: When you were getting close to college time what were you pointed towards?

GIBSON: Not much really. My grades in high school were not really very spectacular. I had about a C+ average. I actually could not have gotten into many colleges and I was actually going to go into the Marines. Then I thought, oh well, I'll try college. I got to college and sort of in a better study environment, and basically became an A student and never quit. I started studying for a change.

Q: Where did you go to college?

GIBSON: San Jose State.

Q: You were there from when to when?

GIBSON: From '60 and I went four-and-a-half years to get my bachelors. That would have been January of '65 when I got my bachelors and I stayed around until June of '66 to get my masters.

Q: When you were in college what sort of got you going?

GIBSON: What I was interested in? For one I was terrified of flunking out because I had such a checkered high school career. Actually in high school I had been in a gifted and talented program because I read a lot and I could read fairly well. I did pretty well at first and then quickly, as soon as I got my car, life went to hell. I knew I was smart enough to go to college but I just didn't have any grades and I lacked self confidence, so I studied like crazy. So it was fear that drove me. As I got to college I got on to the San Jose College judo team from my freshman year on really, and the coach on the judo team hired me. My life in college was wrapped up between studying like crazy, working 30 to 40 hours a week in a chain of medical laboratories as a sort of janitor, clean up boy, messenger and that sort of thing, and it revolved around judo practice. We had tournaments around the country and that sort of thing. In college I got very close to the Japanese American community. A lot of my buddies on the judo team were Japanese guys or else real Japanese guys who had come in.

Q: San Jose was sort of the agricultural heart of California wasn't it?

GIBSON: It was a large orchard area with a lot of apricots, plums and that sort of thing. When I first went up there in '59, I went up with a buddy who was going there just to check it out, there were orchards all over the place. San Jose and Santa Clara were just covered with orchards. By the time I left San Jose in '66 most of the orchards were gone. I went back in '73 and they were all gone. It was a rich agricultural area at one time.

Q: So there was a good solid Japanese American community?

GIBSON: Most of them were farmers or had been or were small business people. There was a community not far from the school. The judo coach actually, we rented our coach from the U.S. Olympic team two or three times, sort of took me under his wing and sort of semi adopted me. He used to feed me and put up with me a lot. His wife and daughters used to do the same. It was a very nice relationship. Having the income because my mom was a widow working at GS-3 or something like that, not making any money, and had it not been for the coach providing me the job and the sort of moral support, I doubt if I would have...

Q: What was the coach's name?

GIBSON: Yoshihiro Uchida. He's still alive and in California. I remember in March of '92 I came back from Thailand. The school had a big dinner in his honor and I came all the way back from Thailand and paid \$100 for the dinner. It was sort of a testimonial dinner. The guy is really well known. He's a great guy.

Q: Being almost a drop-by guest of your judo coach, did it give you any insight into the Far East at all or was this pretty much an Americanized area even in San Jose?

GIBSON: I think at the time San Jose State had the largest or the second largest number of foreign students in the country, largely from Asia. I knew a lot of foreign students. At one time or another I had several roommates from Japan and I got a lot of exposure that way. Most of the guys were associated with Judo. The coach and his family were very Americanized. They were second generation but they kept some of the Japanese customs. We would go from house to house and eat sushi and that sort of thing. Because of that contact I met an awful lot of people from Japan. I had a very good relationship with the coach and so what he would do, he would bring over graduate students from Japan who had finished their college eligibility for judo. These guys were like national level competitors in Japan. He would bring them over and they would spend their graduate years beating up on all of us guys who were on his team. It was to make us tough and to help him teach us. It was very effective. I was the duty guy who was their roommate. These guys would come and they'd say coach suggested that we come and ask you to take care of this guy. So they would move in with me for a while and I would teach them about America and life in the States. He would teach me how to cook Japanese food and then beat the dickens out of me on the judo mat. It was a lot of fun. I got to know a lot of Japanese people and I got a real interest in Japanese culture out of it.

Q: What were the foreign students, particularly the Japanese, getting out of San Jose? Why were they coming there?

GIBSON: That's a good question and I honestly don't have an answer. The judo guys were basically getting a scholarship from the coach to come over and he would pick up their tabs. The other graduate students, some of them which I ran across later in life, were Thai, there were a lot of Filipino, a lot of Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan, a whole mix. What they were getting out of it, I really don't know.

Q: Many engineering?

GIBSON: Yes.

Q: Well I think that is probably the answer.

GIBSON: Yes a lot of engineers, but not all of them. In fact there was a woman who was there the same time I was, who subsequently, purely by chance, ended up working for me in Bangkok. It was a Thai woman who was there studying international relations and just doing something like that. I don't really recall what they were studying but I think largely engineers.

Q: What were you studying other than judo?

GIBSON: Not much. I was a social science major which is what my undergraduate degree is in. It is a hodgepodge of sort of whatever I wanted in the social sciences: history mainly, political relations, international relations type stuff. My masters is in history.

Q: While you were going through this thing, were you pointing yourself toward anything other than doing well in judo and in studying hard? This is you life you understand.

GIBSON: Most people have got to think that you had this early interest in the Foreign Service and all that. Nonsense. I didn't have any interest. I didn't even know about it. I didn't even know the Foreign Service existed. I traveled to Japan as part of the judo team. We went over and competed in Japan. In fact we were the first U.S. judo team to visit Japan since the War at the time. That was 1963.

Q: How did you do?

GIBSON: We got the dickens beat out of us, but graciously. The Japanese were very gracious and took great care of us. We went under USO auspices so we had access to all the military bases where we would stay for very low cost. We paid all this ourselves out of our own pockets and just had a great time. Traveled all around the country putting on judo exhibitions. I think I beat one guy, had one draw, and something like five loses. I had one of the better records. It was pretty tough competition over there and we weren't even fighting their top guys. They wanted to make sure they'd beat us but they didn't waste the time of their really good guys.

I didn't have an interest in the Foreign Service. I didn't even know it existed. Of course by the time I was a graduate student, the Vietnam War was heating up. What I began to set my sights on towards the end of my masters year-and-a-half was a career as a naval officer. I tried to get into the navy before but my eyesight was so bad that they wouldn't take me and they wouldn't give me a waiver. As they were expanding the fleet during the Vietnam War they began to give waivers and they were waiving vision for naval flight officers, the guys who sit in the back seat. I have this great dream of sitting in the back seat of a Phantom Four and cruising around. I signed on and they were processing me. About halfway through the process, just towards the end I guess, they toughened up the requirements again and they said we can't give you a waiver to fly even as a crewmen. I said, "Okay, and they said, "How about being a ship driver or a line officer" or whatever they call it. I said, "Okay, I'll be a ship driver." My whole family had all been career: my father, my father's father, my mom's brother, a whole lot of career navy people in my family. I said this is great and so I went to OCS. In college I was pointing towards a career as a naval officer not as a Foreign Service officer.

Q: You got your masters degree in 1966 and then did you go into the Navy?

GIBSON: Yes, directly to Newport, Rhode Island. I spent from the very end of June until the day after or before Thanksgiving (I forget which now) at Newport, Rhode Island. Then I was assigned to a destroyer home-ported in Long Beach, California which was nice because that's where my wife is from. We took off back there.

Q: Were you married by this time?

GIBSON: I got married in April of '66. My wife was teaching and I think she was substitute teaching. She had gotten her credential in January of '66 as a general secondary teacher. She was teaching at local schools as a substitute. We had been dating since September of '63 and so we decided to get married. We got married in April. At the time I was a teaching assistant in the history department. In June we took off for Rhode Island.

Q: How long were you in the Navy?

GIBSON: Five years almost to the day.

Q: So '66 to '71. You were on a destroyer. What were you doing on the destroyer?

GIBSON: Surprisingly enough it is funny. Out of OCS I wanted to go to swift boats and go patrol around in Vietnam's rivers and stuff, the riverine stuff. My company officer said "look, you want to make a career out of this" because I did. "Others that don't want to make a career of this and are just doing this for a while, we'd say yes go to swift boats and have a ball. But you, you've got to go to destroyers." He talked me into going to destroyers. So then a job came open and I was going to be the DASH officer. DASH stands for drill anti-submarine and helicopter. It was this little helicopter that never really worked well. It was a little thing. They put it in the back on a little helicopter pad in the stern of a destroyer. They would fly it out controlling it with a joy stick and find a submarine and either drop a nuclear weapon on it or nuclear depth charge or shoot it with a torpedo. There are all kinds of funny stories but the damned thing never worked right. I was all set to go to be trained for that but then he said "wait a minute, what's your vision?" Back to the vision thing so I couldn't qualify. Then they sent me to be a gunnery officer. I went to San Diego and I learned to be a gunnery officer. Then they sent me back to my ship in Long Beach and in June of '67 we went to the Gulf of Tonkin, spent a couple of months there, and then came back.

Q: I get the feeling that your vision wasn't good enough to fly a drone but they didn't care whether you shot straight or not.

GIBSON: We shot with computers and map targets and that sort of thing.

Q: During the time that you were in the Tonkin Gulf what was your destroyer doing? What was the name of your destroyer?

GIBSON: The Henry W. Tucker which is ED875. It had been built in time to participate in the Battle of Okinawa. It was old. It had been modernized. It was called a FRAM-1. FRAM stood for free reconstruction and modernization or something like that. It was a nice ship for its day. It is now part of the Brazilian navy, the last I heard anyway. We gave it to the Brazilians for some reason.

We did a whole lot of things. We did an awful lot of playing guard, chasing aircraft carriers around the Gulf of Tonkin in the period. We were to pick up any downed pilots if they crashed coming in, this sort of thing. We never did. We had one chance to pick up a downed pilot when an A-4 went off the deck of one of the carriers, I forget which one. It was a cold launch. He went off and hit his ejection button and he went up in the air as off the angle one on the side, the A-4 went in the water. He came down and before we could get to him a helicopter from the other carrier got him. We get a lot of that and we get a lot of gunfire support for which we won some kind of a Navy commendation.

Q: What were you shooting at?

GIBSON: Trees, buffalo, hopefully some Vietcong though I don't know. It was in support of U.S. ground forces. We did a lot of what they call northern SAR, northern search and rescue. They would send two of us up and we would park off the mouth of Haiphong harbor. There was us (we had guns), and there was a newer destroyer which had missiles and had a gun but it wasn't worth much. But it had anti-aircraft missiles with it so it was nice to have around. The two of us would sit out there and cruise around. We could see the entrance to Haiphong and the ships going in and out.

Q: This is a North Vietnam harbor, the enemy.

GIBSON: Yes, the major seaport there. Our job was to catch shot up airplanes as they'd come back over the Gulf. They would eject and then go into the water there as opposed to on land. The rule of thumb seemed to be that if you got hit over Hanoi or Haiphong, you'd turn and hope you made it over the water. Then you got out over the water and we were there to pick them up. We did that. We picked up a couple of guys and the other ship did. The other ship, the guided missile destroyer had a little helicopter too. We were there to provide protection for the missile ship against PT boats if the ship had a problem. They were there to provide protection against aircraft for us so it worked out okay. It was a lot of fun. So we did those three things.

Q: What else did you do?

GIBSON: We came back right at the very end of December of '67 to the port at Long Beach. The ship was not a happy ship. It was a lot of fun in a lot of ways but we had a real jerk for XO, executive officer. I pretty much decided that the Navy wasn't as glamorous as all that it had been cracked up to be. Many of my graduate school Profs. in college had said don't go in the Navy, go get your Ph.D. and become a teacher. Actually I was one of the guys who didn't have to go into the Navy. My draft status was 4A, which was sole surviving son. They had a category back then for that. I probably would not have been called up actually. I was talking to my detailer and the guy said, "I see you've got a masters degree". In those years it was sort of something. I said, "Yes". He said, "How would you like to teach history at the Naval Academy?" It beats going to sea on the big gray thing. I had to extend, I was a reservist. I extended to make it a five year commitment and went back and taught at the Naval Academy for three years.

Q: You were teaching there from '68 to '71?

GIBSON: Yes. I taught history and I taught international relations.

Q: I would like to examine this a bit because naval officers are sort of notorious for being interested in the Navy, period. I am just reading an autobiography of Admiral Crowe who was Chief of Naval Operations. He was probably the only Ph.D. to become Chief of Naval Operations. He talks about the problem with the Navy of the narrowness of the naval officer and not understanding that the world is a complicated place. It is not just driving ships or flying airplanes, but you have to deal with other countries and all. Here you are in the heart of the beast, you might say, during this time. Can you talk about your experiences there with the young people coming up, capturing the history and all?

GIBSON: I got there just after they first started allowing a different major at the Naval Academy. Prior to that time, maybe a year or two years before I don't know exactly, they had no choice, you majored in engineering. Everybody went through, and you had a few electives and you had some core subjects in the liberal arts, but basically everyone was an engineer. By the time that I got there they were just starting to allow a limited number, and it was limited by order, of people to major in history or international relations or foreign languages, but in very small numbers. The feeling at the Naval Academy was that definitely the liberal arts majors, as opposed to the engineering and science majors, were the second class citizens among midshipmen. They were the ones that didn't get much respect from the company officers and from the administration.

The faculty in the history, liberal arts area didn't get much respect either. Most of the civilian professors in the liberal arts area were guys who had been there forever and they were so narrowly focused in their own minds and everything. In addition to those we had a bunch of young guys like myself and many of my colleagues. We were young officers. Some of them were ensigns and J.V.'s and had never even been on a ship. I was one of the more experienced guys after two years on a ship. We were all constantly getting in trouble with the old line civilian professors. Of course the head of the department of English, history and government was a Navy four stripe or a Navy captain and the XO was a Navy commander. The guys who really had the influence were these old line civilian professors. Some were quite good and quite knowledgeable but they just were very old school and they were so resistant to any kind of a new idea of any way to teach or anything like that. I remember getting in trouble with one because he kept referring to Japs in his lectures to the midshipmen. This was in 1970-71. My wife is a Japanese American and I went up and told him that one day. I said "My wife would really be upset to hear you use the term Jap. I believe the term is Japanese." He did not like that at all. But that was the mentality of these guys.

Even in the time when I was at the Naval Academy just what you were saying is true. They were very much engineering oriented. The lion share of the budget, the new buildings and the new facilities and everything were for the engineers and the science majors. The rest of us took a back seat. That being said, when it comes out to being on a ship I think that a good solid engineering background is essential. If I were the skipper of the ship and had my choice of engineers or liberal arts great thinkers on board, I would want the engineers. I would feel a lot safer. I would feel that my power plant would run better and I would feel that my computers and electronics would be doing better.

I as a history major as a gunnery officer, had two kinds of guys working for me. The first group were the gunners mates who are basically mechanics and kept the guns working. If it needed a part they would change it. They were mechanics, good old boys basically from the south. Then I had another group of guys who were fire control technicians. These guys were smart. They were electronic and math whizzes. They chose not to go to college for one reason or another so they came in enlisted, but they were really smart guys. I could relate to the gunners mates because I understood mechanics. The fire control technicians would start talking to me about circuitry and computers and this sort of stuff, my eyes would glaze. I didn't have a clue what they were talking about which I think kept me from being as effective an officer as an engineering officer in the same job would have been.

Q: There is the basic fact that the Navy is different from really the Air Force, and especially the Army. The Army is sitting around waiting to fight a big war. Even with a fighting war such as in Vietnam, the rest of the people are sort of sitting around and education is one way to keep them busy. You can't sort of do combat every day on the ground whereas the Navy is out there driving ships all the time. The majority of their people are doing that and they can't afford the luxury of this broadening training. I have heard people say for example in dealing with the Army at the war colleges, that the Army is more like us (we're talking about Foreign Service people) but the Navy and to some extent the Air Force are not.

GIBSON: When I went to teach three years at the Naval Academy, all of my more senior officers, my department head, my XO and my skipper, told me I was ruining any chance for a career because especially at a young age to take time out from not being on a ship was the kiss of death basically. It would basically preclude me from having any sort of a successful Navy career. It was the same attitude with like attach $\ddot{\epsilon}$ $\frac{1}{2}$ s. One of department heads was a four striper, a Navy captain, and came back from Chile I think. He had been an attach $\ddot{\epsilon}$ $\frac{1}{2}$. He was the first to say going in the attach $\ddot{\epsilon}$ $\frac{1}{2}$ rank kills you. That's guaranteed that you are never going to go any further. People who they put in the attach $\ddot{\epsilon}$ $\frac{1}{2}$ business are people who aren't going to get promoted anyway past a certain level. The people who go in the Navy to joint commands and things like that are guys who basically, not guys like Admiral Crowe because he's head of the joint command...

Q: He talks about it in the same way. He spells this out that he was a very peculiar beast.

GIBSON: Yes and he is a terribly, exceptionally capable man. Basically they want you riding at sea and shore duty was bad for your career.

Q: Just for the record, the reason why we are talking about this is in the Foreign Service and in our foreign relations, the military is an extremely important component of this and sort of the outlook an all, it is interesting to examine this. What about the students?

GIBSON: Let me just say, and we can do this later at a future time but when we get up to my time in Thailand and Japan I did a lot of pol-mil work and worked a lot with the military guys, all three services. We can get into this then.

Q: What about your students? How were they responding?

GIBSON: The students were basically a great bunch of kids and they were kids. We used to have a joke that we took 18 year old boys and turned them into 22 year old boys because in the Naval Academy in that four years they had such a sheltered life in so many ways, that they never really grew up until they got to sea and went onto ships. The Vietnam War was on and most of them were pretty cynical about it as I recall. They were smart, they were nice kids, they were interested in engineering. Most of them weren't that interested in the liberal arts but they were taking my courses because it was required, I was teaching core courses. They had an engineering bent.

I would say the majority of them, in their cases, I was appalled at the low quality of their ability to write an essay test for example, misspellings, grammatical errors, I was just astounded. One day I remember saying to the class "What's the matter with you guys? You're all smart. I know you are all studying and you're all trying. You write essay answers that have misspelling, grammatical errors and everything, your structure wanders and you can't seem to get a thesis or a subject sentence or whatever they are." They said "We're products of the high schools that we're coming out of." Of course these guys did have good grades, they are smart kids. I wasn't that much older than them but it turned out that when I was in high school they really drilled us in grammar. I had an English teacher that just took us over, really whipped up on us about grammar and spelling. Three spelling errors on a paper, automatic F. One reduced it a grade every test. The midshipmen were saying that in their high school English classes they studied literature. They discussed books and that sort of thing and they were told let your imagination, your creative juices flow. They never really got hammered on grammar and spelling. Admittedly, these were engineers and most of them were never going to really have to work with a lot of prose and writing and that sort of thing, so they thought, but they weren't very good at writing. That's what I recalled. That was my biggest criticism of the kids.

Q: You were there '68 to '71 which was really the height of the protest movement outside. Did this intrude at all? You were teaching political science, international studies and all as sort of the barbarians were screaming outside the walls of Annapolis. Did this intrude?

GIBSON: No they weren't. The barbarians were in Washington. They were having the big protest marches on the mall and that sort of thing. They weren't in Annapolis. There is a school in Annapolis, St. Johns, which is apparently a wonderful little school. It's the great books and the classics thing. You would get the occasional St. Johns kid out there sort of with a sign or something like that. No one took them seriously. They were sort of a harmless bunch of kids. They were nice kids and the midshipmen didn't seem to much care one way or the other. We were pretty isolated from all of that and they're reading about it. Most of the kids were very conservative and of course they were very much opposed to these sorts of anti-war protests. Of course the officer cadre were all just up in arms about "How can we let these guys march and why don't we arrest them all?" and that sort of thing. It was a very conservative crowd. I must confess to sort of being close to that mind set myself in those years. We were isolated from it, we really were. Annapolis was this pleasant little town and on the walled compound of the Naval Academy where we lived and our friends were all of the Naval Academy faculty and staff, we were isolated.

Q: I understand because my home town is Annapolis and I grew up there from '39 to '50 until I went away. I understand how isolated one can be there.

GIBSON: I'll tell you a story. You're talking about the troubles in society. I noticed it first when Hubert Humphrey came to speak at San Jose State in his campaign when he was running for vice president. That must have been in '64. I guess we were starting to get involved in Vietnam. We were there. I remember having a mate in one of my classes who had been a sky rigger pilot and had been doing some time over there. Hubert Humphrey came around and he was heckled. I remember him being heckled by people about the war, partly, and he handled it very well. He was really a smooth guy. Then I sort of graduated and went off to East Asia and into the Navy cocoon where I was sort of isolated from it, too.

But then I remember coming back from, I guess I had just gotten back from the Gulf of Tonkin and my wife and I went up to visit her cousin in San Francisco. We went to a party and we are all standing around in there. I am the only guy there that has got a short haircut and has shaved within the last month. All I hear is all this stuff which to me is constant. The Vietnam War was a big topic of conversation. Finally, I was just getting angry. I remember being angry because it wasn't the guys fighting them, we were just doing our job. If we volunteered to go it is one thing but if we didn't volunteer they were going to round us up and send us. I remember standing around in the kitchen near the refrigerator. There were about four or five people and finally one of them said to me "What do you do?" I was so pissed off at the time that I looked him in the eye and said "I kill people." I'm in the Navy and I had just got back from Vietnam and I'm a gunnery officer. I was just so angry at that but talk about putting a stop to a conversation and being left alone in the kitchen. I guess they thought I was so aggressive that they didn't even want to beat up on me. But basically I don't recall much of it.

Q: You had your five year commitment. Were you beginning to look out, realize that this was not your thing?

GIBSON: You know, I did. I enrolled at the University of Maryland in their graduate program. I was going to work on my Ph.D. I got in there and started doing that. I'd take a course here and a course there. I guess about a year-and-a-half before I got out of the Navy, we always in those days had a Foreign Service officer posted to English, history and government. I don't know if the job is still there.

Q: Yes it's still there.

GIBSON: I was blessed with having two very interesting guys during my three years there though I can't remember the names of either one of them.

Q: Was Jack Mendelson one of them by any chance?

GIBSON: No. The first guy I thought was Phil something. He left. He had been in Cambodia and Vietnam. He left, got out of the Service and went to work for Gulf Oil, doubling his salary and then something, in the international relations area. The guy who replaced him had been CG or consul in Nassau. He had been in the bombing of our embassy in Saigon, the one in '64 or '65 with all the flying glass. I can't remember the guys name. I told these guys, "boy that sounds like it would be kind of fun". You know who taught there too at the time, he taught Russian history, Jim Ponds, Jim? He became ambassador to somewhere or DCM in Moscow or something. He had a very successful career. I can't remember his name.

Q: You can always add that.

GIBSON: Anyway it sounded like it was kind of fun. Another guy who's still in the service, another who had a very successful career, everyone but me. We went down to the test and we passed the test. They would come back to you and say "when do you want to come in?" I said "I have a year or year-and-a-half on my obligation. They said "we can get you out of that." I said, "No, I've made an obligation and I made a deal with the Navy. I will do my five years." What it really was, I wasn't sure that I wanted to go in and work for the State Department. I still wanted to stay in the Navy. So as the Navy time was coming around, I said to them that what I wanted to do was make a deal. I said I will go augment, meaning go regular Navy, if you will change my designator to 1630. I was an 1100.

Q: Which means what?

GIBSON: Unrestricted line officer, you drive ships. That is all you are going to do in your life. I want to be an intelligence officer. Change me to Intelligence and I will augment and you will have a career guy. They came back and said no, we don't need any Intelligence officers but boy do we have some great jobs for you on the big gray things that are going to go out and cruise the ocean again. I just kept fooling around and finally it was clear that they weren't going to let me go intelligence so I said "Okay, bye, guys" and I went to work for the State Department. It was pretty close, it was a close decision. I almost didn't leave the Navy.

Q: When you passed the written exam, did you take an oral exam?

GIBSON: Yes.

Q: Could you describe the process?

GIBSON: Wonderful process. First of all, be aware as you probably know back in those days the written exam was a whole day. We went down to civil service headquarters in D.C. and spent the whole day down there taking this silly test.

Q: You're talking to somebody who took a three-and-a-half day exam.

GIBSON: I know another guy who took that. Anyway, it was a long exam. Then I got notified and fairly soon took the oral test. I can't remember where I took it to tell you the truth, somewhere down in D.C. There were three guys, two were State and one was a USIS officer. There were three in a row at a table and I was sitting on a chair in front of them isolated. I didn't have a little table in front of me, I was just sitting on a chair under their direct gaze.

It pretty quickly became clear that it was good guys, bad guys. Two of them were sort of good guys and there was the bad guy, the heavy, who kept asking the tough questions and sort of digging and sort of making facial expressions that indicated is that the best you can do, that sort of thing. I'm sitting there in front of them for about an hour-and-a-half and they drilled me on all kinds of obscure things. I thought that the written test had enough arcane questions on it but these guys were something. They just drilled me for about an hour-and-a-half.

Q: Do you remember any of the questions?

GIBSON: I remembered some. I remember one was "Oh, you have an interest in Asia. Well we're going to give Okinawa back to the Japanese." I think that was actually in May of '72. "How do you think the Okinawans are going to be treated by the Japanese?" I said "Just the way they are treated." They are a lower form of life. They are not a lower form of life, they are discriminated against by the mainland Japanese and there is not a lot of love. So I explained all that, it was one.

I remember being asked by the USIS guy, who seemed to me to be the heavy, about American culture and its influence around the world. Well I didn't have any knowledge of it. I had been spreading culture with a five inch 38ths cannon. I didn't have time for this stuff. So I said "naturally there is jazz," and of course I don't know anything about jazz. He said "What are some of your favorite jazz artists?" I said "I don't really have any favorites, I just know that jazz is very popular." He asked "What kind of music do you like?" I said "I like classical," which I did, and of course I could answer a lot of his questions about favorite composers and that sort of thing. They asked me about hobbies and at the time it was photography. Actually I used to take pictures of flowers in close-ups and so we talked about flower photography.

He asked me some other questions, especially the USIS guy. I just figured, I'm not a BSer, I am not going to lie to them. So I'd say, "I don't have a clue." Sorry I can't get you there rather than try to get myself down in some quagmire of B.S. What were some of the other ones? I guess on current events. I mean a lot of what was going on in the world at the time, that sort of thing. I remember the one on Japan because it turned out that I later served on Okinawa and I remembered that question. But that's about all I really remember, but I remember it was tough.

Then they sent me down the hall and I sat down in a little room. They said to go down there and wait. A few minutes later one of the guys come in. Not the USIS guy, it was one of the good cops. He comes to me and says "Congratulations Mr. Gibson you've passed and we'll put you on the register. Now which cone would you like to be in?" "Cone?" He explained the four cones and I said "I'd like to do admin work because I'd administered men on a ship, I'd done budgets and been on audit boards and that sort of thing." He said, "You don't really have the academic background to be an administrative officer. You don't have a degree in business or something like that. How would you like to be a consular officer?" "Okay." He put me down as a consular officer. I didn't care, I just wanted to be in the Foreign Service. I wasn't even sure I wanted to be in, I just wanted to have the opportunity. He says "OK, I think you'll be a good consular officer." He went away and a year-and-a-half later or so I became a Foreign Service officer.

Q: You came into the Foreign Service when?

GIBSON: I got out of the Navy I think officially sometime in late June of '71 and I think it was very early July when I officially got in. So I didn't, as we say, miss a paycheck.

Q: When you came in, I assume you took the basic officer course, A-100?

GIBSON: Right.

Q: Can you characterize the class and your impression of the group that you came in with?

GIBSON: There were 36 people in there. At the time if you were 29 you could come into the Foreign Service, if you were 30 you could not, if I understand it. Or it may be if you're 28 you could come in, but I think it was 29 you could come in so we were all kind of young. There was a mixed State and USIS class. I'm just guessing that maybe eight or nine were USIS officers and the rest of us were State. Maybe ten were USIS officers, something like that. We are all basically young. Probably half of the guys were former military vets. We had a West Point grad who had made major and got out just in time, he was the oldest guy. I was one of the older guys in there. Navy, Air Force, Army, a lot of us were vets in the class. We had a fair sprinkling of women and we had a Hispanic guy, maybe three or four African American officers. We had sort of a mixed class.

Most of them were very enthusiastic. A lot of us spoke languages already which of course was intimidating for guys like me who didn't speak any language. We had all these guys speak all these languages: French, Indonesian, Thai, German and all these languages. It was a very close class. There was a real feeling of camaraderie and we all got along. I am sure there must have been little personnel differences among some of them but I just recall it as being a very close, very happy group and that was partly because of our handlers, the guys running the A-100 course. I can't remember their names, I'd know it if I heard them. It was a very close group and a lot of the officers out of it did very well.

Q: At this point you were removed from sort of the cocoon of the Navy and although many of you were from military background, by '71 we were sort of disconnecting from Vietnam but it was still a matter of great debate and all of that. Were you picking up any of that within your group? Was Vietnam discussed at all?

GIBSON: Only in the sense that some of us wanted to go there for CORDS, but they had discontinued it. I guess until two or three classes before, everybody almost went to CORDS which is what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to CORDS, I thought that would be a lot of fun. None of us could go to CORDS. Obviously as you say, we are winding down, we're pulling back. So we talked about it in that sense from the standpoint of assignments and that sort of thing joking like: oh yeah we all want to go to CORDS but we can't, too bad, let's go somewhere else, let's go to Paris. We're all vets and we would tell sea stories or whatever but I don't remember really the war being a controversial thing. I am sure we must have talked about it because many of us had been there and we sort of swapped sea stories as I said, but I don't recall it being a real issue.

Later in my Foreign Service career, I had the misfortune to sit at a table on an off-site training thing with three other officers. One of them was quite nice but the other two jumped all over me because it came out that I had been in the military and had been in Vietnam. This was in the late '70s about '78 or so. They just jumped all over me like "How could you have done that?" I had an answer which I thought was rather clever. I said, and it was the truth, "Because it was the greatest thing out of my generation and I didn't want to miss it. I didn't miss it and I'm glad I didn't miss it but I wish it hadn't happened." They weren't happy with that. Boy they jumped all over me, but that was much later.

Q: While you were doing this, did you want to go somewhere?

GIBSON: I wanted to go to Asia because that was where my interests were. I wanted to go to Japan or somewhere out in Asia but there weren't any good Asian assignments on the list so I got my second choice. My first choice was Casablanca because I'm a romantic at heart. I'd seen the movie. One of my good friends in the course who has remained a friend, I haven't seen him in a few years but we crossed paths again, he got that. I got my second choice which was Fort of France in Martinique which has since closed of course. My friend Mike Mahoney, went to Casablanca. Mike said to me later when we were in personnel together, "The reason you got Martinique", Mike wanted Martinique too, "is you got it because you were married." One of the class guys or personnel guys told Mike that the reason Mike didn't get it was that Martinique wasn't very good for a bachelor. It was better to have a married man, a family man, down there. So I was with family and I went, and Mike went to Casablanca. That was sort of temporary and from there I got assigned to Rangoon.

Q: Let's talk about Martinique for a bit. You were in Martinique when?

GIBSON: February of '72 after 19 weeks of French with a wonderful grade of 1/+2 or was it 2/1+, I've forgotten. It wasn't very good.

Q: We're talking about a very low grade. You had to bring yourself up to a three I think in order to get off language probation.

GIBSON: Yes, so I obviously was still on language probation. I went there in February of '72 and I replaced an officer who you may know, Marty Chesses, who was on his third or fourth tour. I don't know where he learned French but his French was beautiful. If not bilingual, damn close. The boss, I found out after I got down there, had sent a steady stream of messages back to Washington opposing my assignment because I wasn't good enough in French. He was overruled and so I go down and Marty goes on to somewhere else. Our paths have crossed once or twice since then. I was there from February of '72 until November, Thanksgiving Day or the day after, of 1973. That was my first assignment. Martinique at the time was a small post. There was the principal officer, there was me, an American secretary and I think something like six local employees. We covered Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana as well as the French part of St. Martin.

Q: What were you doing there?

GIBSON: With the esteemed position of vice consul, I did all the visa work naturally and I did the commercial work. I did all the WTDRs, World Trade Directory Reports. I handled things like working with police, when the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs came down I would liaise with them, and when the Coast Guard came down I'd have to work with the Coast Guard guys. The boss spent his time working the political side of the street and economic reporting, what little there was. At that time there was a fairly strong movement for either autonomy or independence, depending on where you stood on the spectrum, from France. The boss spent most of his time following that, the independence autonomous movement.

Q: This was a time when the Caribbean nations were all becoming independent.

GIBSON: Right. The Martiniqueans wanted to become independent as well. Some did, some didn't. The complicating factor was always that the French government was pumping tremendous amounts of money into the island. The French kept making it very clear that in your current status as an overseas department, we are going to keep pumping money in. If you want another kind of status, we're going to talk about how much money we're going to pump in. The economy simply would have collapsed without the French. I don't know if it is still that way today. I would not be surprised if that were the case.

Q: The French had made the point very clear in Africa to those Francophone countries that did not want to have close relations to France. They took everything including the faucets off the fixtures. How did you find Foreign Service life?

GIBSON: Loved it. Loved Martinique. My wife hated it. I had been trained in French for what it was worth and I studied real hard while I was there. I got a tutor and studied real hard. It was an R&R post and I came back about a year into the assignment, passed my test and went on back. My wife didn't come back. She did not speak any French. Those were the days when they would not pay for your spouse to study a foreign language. I had taken a pay cut from the Navy to come into the State Department in the first place. We had a little boy. Martinique was very expensive. Right before we had gone down there had been the Smithsonian Conference where right after that they devalued the dollar against the franc, let the dollar float I guess is what they did. It was just punishing down there financially so we did not have the money to have my wife study French. We weren't going to direct the money into that so she never learned French. Martinique had very few English speakers and so when we came up after home leave, she stayed in the States for several months. I went back down alone. She eventually came back down not long before I left. She and our son stayed with her parents in California.

Q: Were there any consular issues there?

GIBSON: No. There were a lot of the visa things. There were a lot of American death cases. On cruise ships an elderly portion of the population would come down and they would overdo on a hike or something or they would be sick before they got on the boat. That was also a period in the early '70s in the United States when we started the process of if people who had mental problems and they weren't a danger to themselves or society, we were sort of letting them out. Many of those guys ended up on Martinique. I had cases with mentally ill people about every couple of months. Every couple of three months, I had one. These were guys who were really wacko and we had to get them out of Martinique, back up to the States and arrange with the right kind of social agency either Social Security or Health, I don't know if it was HEW at the time. We would arrange so they would be sort of met at the plane and be taken care of and this sort of thing. It's not funny and these are people with real problems but some of the circumstances that got created were just hilarious. To this day my wife and I trade these stories. Some of the best sea stories I've ever gotten out of the Foreign Service were dealing with these people.

Q: Can you tell me one?

GIBSON: There were some great ones. I'll tell you the one that was the scariest. There was an American down there who was observed one night walking around buck naked with a 22 rifle over his shoulder. How he ever got it into Martinique I have not the foggiest notion. He was walking around until about midnight or one o'clock in the morning. He then went back to his hotel and he was sort of followed. He had been with a prostitute and she rolled him I guess or something like that.

Q: Would you explain what rolling means?

GIBSON: At some point during their business transaction she lifted his wallet and clothes and apparently disappeared. That was it. He was out looking for her with a 22 rifle. It had been in his room so he could have put new clothes on but he didn't bother. I got a call the very next morning from the police. The hotel people had called the police and the police had called me. I can remember they wanted me to go talk to this guy at the door. I can remember like in the movie where you stand to the side and you knock on the door because you are afraid that bullets are going to come through the door. I talked him into opening the door and going away with the nice policemen. They carried his 22 rifle for him so he didn't have to carry it. That was sort of scary.

There was a Club Med down there. There was a long, curving banister that went up to the second floor at the Club Med. This guy appeared at the head of the banister dressed in women's underwear and slid down the banister into the mob down below. They carted him off. We had people who would just go berserk and tear their hotel room all apart. I had another guy who was pursued either by the crime syndicate or the CIA or both and he wasn't sure which. He was going to leave the islands and go the Virgin Islands or Venezuela, of course, the opposite direction. We had guys like that coming through. A woman in retrospect must have had Alzheimers, had gotten off a cruise ship and gotten lost. One woman I'm speaking to her with the ships agent trying to get her repatriated back up the States. The ships agent was being very cooperative. She was just as sweet and nice to me: "Oh, you're such a nice young man." Within five minutes she had turned on me, venomous swearing at me and telling me what a dirt ball I was and that sort of thing. There were just a whole series of cases like that.

I'll tell you another interesting case that we had, back to the Vietnam War. The regional FBI office down in Caracas I think it was, told us that there was a guy on Martinique from Montana. In Montana he had planted a bomb to destroy several National Guard trucks and vehicles at a National Guard armory to protest the Vietnam War. He had then fled the country with a warrant out for his arrest. We sort of knew that this guy was around. One day he walked into my office and tells me that he is going to renounce his citizenship and he wants to know how to do that. He was really kind of a nice guy and a young guy. I said "You don't want renounce your citizenship. They won't drop charges against you." It came out, and he was quite open, that he was the fugitive. I said "By renouncing your citizenship it's not a get out of jail free card, you still have to pay the price if you come back to the States whether you're French or anything else." He said, "Oh yeah, I know that. I've been just so turned off by the war and the whole nature of the U.S. government" and so on and so on that he wanted to renounce his citizenship. I said "Go back and think about it." He said "No, I don't want to think about it." I said "I don't know, I've never done this before. I've got to do some paperwork." I was stalling hoping I could talk him out of it.

Meanwhile I told the FBI guy that he was there and they contacted the French police to get him arrested. He came back again I guess before the French police arrested him. Finally he just kept insisting and he said he was going to write his congressman if I didn't let him renounce his citizenship. There was a wife or a girlfriend, I don't know if she was French. I said I don't need a congressional, I get enough of those on visa cases. I said "here's how you do it", and he did it. Then the FBI got him arrested and tried to extradite him. I remember taking him books in his jail cell and that sort of thing. He was a real nice guy. The French would not extradite him because his crimes had been political and he didn't hurt anybody or anything. The French let him out of jail and gave him a laissez passer¹/₂ and I'm told by the FBI that he went to Algeria first and then to France. The debris of the war was still going around. He was a fascinating guy. I can't remember his name. A real nice fellow. In fact in better times, we probably would have been friends.

Q: You left in '73. What were you asking for and what did you get?

GIBSON: This was before the days of open assignments. In those days we didn't have the open assignment list where you asked for anything. Maybe if you had been around for a while, like Steve Kenny had been around a while and knew the ropes. I didn't have a clue. I got a message one day from a guy on the French desk, why he was on the French desk and doing this I just can't figure out. He said "How would you like to go to Rangoon?" What he had to do with Rangoon is still to this day totally unclear to me. I said wow, great, I get to go to Asia. So I said "Yeah, I'll go to Rangoon." Nothing is special about Rangoon, I just wanted to get to Asia. The next thing I knew I was processed and I got a set of orders for Rangoon. I had no idea what else was open or what other possibilities were before me but I heard Rangoon. I had come of age in the Navy and if the Navy said go here, okay. So the State Department said go here, okay. Out of A-100 we did get to list three or four choices and they showed us what was open, that was fine. To me I thought that was kind of strange. Coming out of Martinique they just phoned me and said "do you want to go?" And I said "yeah" so that's where we went.

Q: You were in Rangoon from when to when?

GIBSON: 18 months. It was back in the days when junior officer assignments were 18 months, at least in Rangoon. I got there in January of '74 and I left in July of '75.

Q: What was your assignment in Rangoon?

GIBSON: Vice consul. There was a one officer visa section and I had me, a Sino-Burmese guy and a Burmese woman. We were the consular section.

Q: What did your wife think about this? Was this more to her liking?

GIBSON: Yes, I guess so. She had been totally unhappy in Martinique because she couldn't communicate with anybody. It is such a small community and the relationships between the boss, the American secretary, and myself were not good. The American secretary drank too much and it was just not a happy work environment. She was delighted to get out of there and she liked the idea of going to Asia. She had been subjected in Martinique by the local population to racist remarks and leering and that sort of thing. She did not really feel comfortable. She liked the idea of going back to Asia where she looked like everybody else. She loved Rangoon, as did I. Of course, I loved Martinique. I was happy everywhere I went. I never had a posting I didn't like. She was quite happy to go there.

I was consular officer and I guess my predecessor had been a full time consular officer. I found that there wasn't enough to do to keep me busy so I kept pestering the political, economic and admin. guys for other things. They would give me their scruff work. I got the E&E plan.

Q: That's the emergency plan.

GIBSON: The emergency evacuation plan. They gave me civil aviation, so I did work on that. Then the chief of the political economic combined section, who turned out to be a very close friend of the family for years thereafter, let me do about whatever I wanted. I did reports on things like their judiciary system, the legal system. It was sort of the peripheral stuff that your normal political officer doesn't get around to. I did a lot of interesting stuff.

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

GIBSON: When I first got there we didn't have one. I think Dirk Byroad had just left. John Lacey was the chargé d'affaires. A nice fellow. I think that may have been his last assignment. Not long after I got there David Osborne came and he was the ambassador until I left. A remarkable guy. Too bad you can't interview him. He died, he was killed in an accident.

Q: How did he run the embassy?

GIBSON: I'm really not a very good bureaucrat. I just sort of did my job, sort of played around and that sort of thing. I don't know how he ran the embassy. He was a very nice man. I found working for him to be perfectly fine. John Lacey transferred and we got a new DCM, Richard (I've forgot his last name). He was a very nice man. This was probably towards the end of my assignment. Lacey was ill, I think. Anyway, David Osborne was one of the smartest guys you ever want to meet. He taught himself Burmese and within six months of being there was giving speeches in Burmese. I heard him speak French at cocktail parties and such. He spoke tremendously good French. I know he spoke Chinese and Japanese.

Here's an interesting story on David Osborne. We had an American club which still exists in Rangoon on a compound, and the Brits had a club. The Brits allowed the Aussies to be in their club. It wasn't a big embassy community, there were something like 20 embassies or so. Our club had a reciprocal relationship with any club that gave us reciprocal privileges and that meant the British club. So there was the American club and the British club. It was a very white environment there.

David came in one day and said "I want you to run for office. I want you to be elected to the American club board (or the American Association board). I want you to run for it." He didn't really tell me why, it was just that he wanted me to be on it as a consular officer. So I did and I got a seat. Then we met and chose the president and I became the president of the board. David Osborne comes to me and says "OK Dick what I want you to do is I want you to integrate the club." He tried not to be heavy handed, he could have just ordered it, but that was his style. You're the president, you do it. I agreed with it.

Q: What was the context of integrating.

GIBSON: Let somebody besides the Brits enter the club, other diplomats from other countries: Indians, not Chinese they wouldn't have joined it anyway, Thai, Japanese, or Bengali or anybody. I waged a several months, well it seemed like a long time, campaign to integrate the club like that. Over the dead body of most of the board members, not most but I gathered a majority of one or something like that, we passed a new rule saying that Americans are the voting members and everybody else is like an associate member. They don't get to vote and we can limit the number of them so that we don't overcrowd the facilities and so forth. Limit it to diplomats because we were having duty free booze and food served there and that sort of thing. We did it and basically it was because David was giving me all the support that I needed. At the end we had a club that had Japanese, Indians and sort of French, and we had a variety of people in there for a change.

One of the things that struck me was the hostility on the part of a large part of the American embassy community to integrating the club that way. I could never really figure it out and this may not sound right but we basically had an embassy of about 55 people of which how many were State you could imagine that. There seemed to be the officer level State people, as opposed to secretaries necessarily, and the USIS people, they seemed pretty much at ease with this. The communicator community, the technical people in the embassy had a large segment of people that were basically red necks and the hostility toward integrating the club having non-Anglos in the pool, I found it amazing. But anyway it happened and I made a lot of enemies but it worked.

Q: What was the situation in Burma in the '74 to '75 period?

GIBSON: We were very controlled. We could go right out in the immediate area around Rangoon. We still had a consulate at the time in Mandalay and we booked Mandalay, but as diplomats we couldn't go very far without special permission from the government. We would send a dip note to the government and they would take their own sweet time about answering. Sometimes they would let us go and sometimes they wouldn't, normally they wouldn't. Their excuse was had something to do with some Russians that were kidnapped in about 1972 or 1973, it is foggy in my mind now.

Khun Sa had been arrested, I think, in '71 by the Burmese government. Khun Sa is the notorious drug trafficker up in the Golden Triangle area. He was arrested by the Burmese and put in jail in I think '71. In the next year or the year after, his henchmen kidnapped a couple of Russian doctors or engineers from the town of Taunggyi which is in the Shan State. They held them and they wanted to do a trade. The Burmese government held off for a long time and these poor Russian guys, I don't know where they were held, they weren't mistreated or anything but they were just held captive for a year or so, I'd have to go back and check on that. The idea was that was the excuse the government used: if you guys travel up there they are going to kidnap you and make trouble with you, for us and everybody else so we can't let you go to sensitive areas. I think it was also that they didn't want us over there nosing around. There are all kinds of games played there. Anyway, we were very compliant. We couldn't go a lot of places.

Any time a Burmese official had any kind of conversation with an American, the Burmese official had to write it up in a formal report and submit it. So if you invited a Burmese official to your house it was almost impossible to get them there except the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these guys could come. A very secretive, closed society, much like it is today. They were very suspicious and xenophobic and didn't want to have anything to do with us basically.

There were three sets of public disturbances during my years there. One was the famous thing when U Thant died and his funeral turned into a riot. There were a couple of other student type of launched things. One with students and one with workers and the two never met. You couldn't get the workers and the students to unite and go out there and do it together. You'd have either the students and they'd have to be put down, then the workers and they had to be put down. Three different times, it was not a happy place.

Socially, the diplomatic community hung around with the diplomatic community. No official would hang around with you. It was the kiss of death to be too friendly to the foreigners. It was poor and things didn't work. The army ran things. Pretty much it has changed, it's better.

Q: What were our interests in Burma at that time?

GIBSON: Our interests were very limited. We had almost no meaningful contact with the Rangoon government at the time but there was starting to be sort of a rapprochement on narcotics. This was all not at my level. This was going on around me and I wasn't really aware of it. We were by '72 or '73 well into negotiations with the Burmese to begin what became a rather long lasting program of providing them with airplanes, helicopters, and communications, non-lethal equipment to use in suppressing the drug trafficking in the Shan State. This was going on and it was causing closer ties but it was more the clandestine side of the house that was taking care of this. McAvoy was there and he was the station chief. He's now with Continental or maybe he's retired from Continental by now but he did very well. He was a VP or big in Continental Airlines. Anyway, he I think was engineering the whole thing. I think he basically took care of that and then State got involved of course and that sort of thing. There was starting to be a program on narcotics cooperation there and that was really the big thing. We had the attachés and they would hang out with the Thai army and the air force. But there was no real political exchange.

There was the famous story by David Osborne. This is such a great story that you've got to have it in here. We got one of these stupid things that the department was so good at sending out to all diplomatic and consular posts. We're negotiating at the time with the Brits for Diego Garcia to build our bases in the Indian Ocean. We were going to build a base, which we eventually built, and the British let us have our base there. We got this all diplomatic and consular posts notice wanting us to ascertain the reaction of the host country to the development of this as a base. This is the process and naturally the Indians were up in arms about it and so on.

They wanted to know obviously how the Burmese felt about it. David Osborne didn't even bother to go in and talk to the Burmese but the message came in and we all saw the message. As the consular officer, chief bottle washer, the whole thing, I got to be at the country team meeting. At the next country team meeting I am sitting there and David has got this cable and he says "I think you have all seen this cable. I don't know if you have seen my response yet." He sort of passed it around. The response is a one liner. It says the Burmese think that Diego Garcia is a Cuban cigar. That's exactly right. The Burmese weren't going to say anything. Regardless of what they thought they weren't going to say anything about it because they were very in control. Had they their druthers, who knows what they really felt but they weren't going to say anything.

I am told that that is what ruined David Osborne's career because when he left Rangoon he ended up on the inspection board. The story is that Henry Kissinger read that and went ballistic. Apparently he ranted and raved, threw it down and complained that this was like an insult to him for asking this question and this sort of thing, this was like flippancy. He was really upset. The story is that this basically scuttled Osborne's career. I don't know if it is true or not, who knows, but it was a great story. The cable was great. I may have missed a word or two but basically it was a one liner.

In short, we have almost no trade with Burma. Our only interest there at the time was twofold. There was the drug question. The second one was the BCP, the Burma Communist Party, which was then heavily supported by the Chinese. It occupied a very large portion of northeastern Burma in the Wa, Konkan and northern Shan States, part of the Kachin State I think. These guys basically ran that section of the country and the Burma army was always there fighting with them all of the time, ramping up on them, and being ramped up on and it was sort of like a stalemate. Meanwhile there was another faction of the Burma Communist Party that the old sort of pro-Russian remnants had been in down in the actual Burman area of the country. While I was there the Burma army rounded up the last of them, killed the leaders. They were captured dead as the Burmese newspapers liked to say. The insurgency in the northeast we were watching because the Indochina mess was still sorting out. It had pretty much been sorted out by then. I remember Vietnam fell while I was there and Cambodia fell while I was there.

I will tell you two interesting stories about that. The first is that all of the old Asian hands at post were saying what's going to happen is the Vietnamese are going to just go down there and massacre the southerners and the Cambodians are just going to lay back and just sort of forget about it. In retrospect it was the exact opposite which I found interesting. So much for conventional wisdom.

The other thing was there Vietnam fell in April of '75, in February there was that famous battle in the highlands at Ban Me Thuot which sort of when that went, everybody fell. I didn't know anything about it but my colleagues who knew something about Vietnam said that's bad guys, it's really close to the end. Anyway right around the beginning of the year Josiah Bennett (I think that was his name) who I think was the political counselor in Saigon, was on a tour in Southeast Asia going from embassy to embassy giving the light at the end of the tunnel speech. It was the most unreal thing I've ever seen in my life. We are all sitting there in the bubble, in the special room where we have secret meetings, and Bennett is sitting in there telling everybody all these good signs on how the South Vietnamese were getting their act together and they're dancing here and they're pulling this thing this out. We were all sitting there looking at each other. We all have to read papers and we know what is going on. The more senior guys were sitting there looking very intent and nodding and all of us young guys are looking around at each other and are thinking, wait a minute what's going on around here? It was the light at the end of the tunnel speech. We got out and just couldn't believe it and started talking amongst ourselves. Within four months of course it is over. It was unreal.

Q: He was reflecting Graham Martin, this was his job. What I'm saying is that whole thing was really a very peculiar situation.

GIBSON: I guess so.

Q: Who was in power? Was it Ne Win? What sort of estimate did people have of him?

GIBSON: He ruled with an iron hand. There was no doubt who was in charge. At the time he was always going to Europe for medical treatments for one thing or another so there was always talk about he's not going to make it. He's still alive today, so so much for that conventional wisdom, too. He was very reclusive. A very hard man to get to see. The story was the U.S. ambassador probably would see him when they presented credentials and if they were lucky they would see him at their exit farewell visit. Nobody saw him in-between. He was reclusive even then and more reclusive now. The big gossip around town was that his son, who was a pilot and flew for Burma Airways, I guess at one time he had flown in the air force or something, was alleged to be a heroin addict. I don't know if that was true or not, it was the talk. It was said that that was one of the reasons why Ne Win himself was so interested in the anti-drug program of the United States. In retrospect I think that is nonsense. I think Ne Win was interested in it because the drug trade was supporting and funding the insurgency which denied him control of the entire country. He wanted our equipment to ramp up on these guys so he could control his country. The daughter, who was said to be very bright, very capable, and very influential, and I guess she still is, but very secretive and nobody ever saw them much.

Q: I was told about the one entree to the ruling group of military people was golf. Was that true?

GIBSON: Yes, golf, but also in Rangoon, tennis was very popular. The guys who had the very best access in Rangoon were the military guys, the attaché¹/₂s. There were two. There was an army attaché¹/₂ who was the DAT and there was an air force attaché¹/₂ who was the assistant. There was a naval attaché¹/₂ in Bangkok who was still accredited. These guys had the most access of anybody because the military ran the country and they had to deal with the military. They played golf but they played tennis an awful lot. Tennis seemed to be the really popular game there. That's where I learned to play tennis.

Q: What about dissidents and all that? Would you have people coming in to the consular section being dissident or anything of that nature?

GIBSON: We did have one defection when I was there as I recall, but I wasn't involved with it, Clyde Boyce was. It was some Bulgarian diplomat or some Eastern European diplomat who defected but I don't know the details of it. No, we didn't have any dissidents. We had very little business in the consular work because it was very hard to get a visa to leave. Most of our visas were A visas, official visas for diplomats going to the United Nations or wherever. We were issuing a lot of immigrant visas at the time but they were going to mainly ethnic Chinese and Indians.

When I first got there the Burmese had just finished up shipping large numbers of Indians back to India. India said look, all you overseas Indians if you are in bad places like that, come on back and we will help you get settled. Many of the Indians in Burma took the offer and went back. Indians were in mainly unskilled laborer type jobs and the Burmese being very xenophobic, were very anti-Indian. Indians took a lot of abuse, discrimination and that sort of thing. The same with the Chinese. They were very suspicious of the Chinese. The Chinese were back in the Cultural Revolution, the insurgency up on the border and all this sort of thing. They weren't Burmese citizens, they had Taiwan passports. They were allowed to leave and so they had to get an exit visa before they came to see us. Most of the Indians were going back to India. We took quite a few Chinese immigrants.

That was in the days when they had a program where if you had a skill, trade, or profession that was in short supply in the United States you could come. Actually that program had been stopped a couple years before I got to Rangoon. Under that program, if you were an auto mechanic, if you were a cook, if you were a cabinetmaker, you could get a visa. The program was discontinued but there was some kind of a court challenge that forced it to be reinstated and all those on the waiting list who had signed up to come in, had to be adjudicated. We had an awful lot of these guys who came in the office and applied for visas under these circumstances. They were almost all Chinese. I was a curious man and started investigating them all. I investigated every single case and many of them were fraudulent. If it was a carpenter, I would say make me a dovetail joint. If it was an auto mechanic I'd say inside the distributor we've got this or that, because I'd grown up working on cars, and so I could quickly figure out if this guy even knew what a car was. That was basically our visa work.

It was illegal for most Burmese to leave the country. For one they didn't have any foreign exchange and if you were at all political involved with the old regime in any way, they probably wouldn't give you a passport. Most Burmese who wanted out would walk down to Thailand overland. They would dodge the army patrols and the bandits and thugs along the way.

What had happened, when the military regime took over for the second and permanent time in 1962, the dominant merchant class, the people who dominated the economy in the first 12, 13, 14 years of independence were Indians and Chinese. No big surprise right? The Burmans set about nationalizing everything they could get their hands on and basically driving these people out of the country. The people who were leaving, many of them had been quite wealthy at one time and they had big houses and had to sell them, practically desert them or give them away in order to leave. It was really kind of sad. I got in on the tail end of that. The Chinese were mostly the small merchant type but the Indians, some of them had been big traders, financial dealings and big time merchants and this sort of thing.

Q: You were there during the riots, the student riots and the workers riots? Did the embassy play any role at all?

GIBSON: You know I don't know. It wasn't in my turf and I don't remember. We were concerned about it and took care of our own security and that sort of thing. We didn't seem to have much to say about it. We reported it. Basically it is one of those things that I don't recall any human rights type cables saying go in there and tell the Burmese that they shouldn't shoot their own people. The Burmese would have laughed at you, if they would give you an appointment. No I don't remember any big response on our part except reporting on it.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point. I would like to put at the end here, you left in 1975?

GIBSON: I came back to be Burma desk officer.

Q: We'll pick it up in 1975 when you're the Burma desk officer.

Today is the 15th of April, 1998. Dick, in 1975 you were going to be doing what?

GIBSON: In July of 1975 I took a direct transfer back to the Department to an office called EA/TB, the East Asia Bureau, Thai Burma Desk. My job on the desk was one, to be the Burma desk officer and two, to be the officer for both Thailand and Burma on narcotics issues. That second one ended up taking probably as much, if not more, of my time than being Burma desk officer.

Q: First you were on the desk from '75 until when?

GIBSON: Summer of '77.

Q: When you took over the desk how did you see the situation in Burma and what were American interests?

GIBSON: By the time I got on the desk, the American interest in Burma was overwhelmingly narcotics and that is why they paired the two jobs basically. I can not remember any other issues that we really had with the Burmese at that time. It was totally narcotics as far as I recall. There would be the occasional *détachement* on a particular vote in the UN but we all knew we were just going through the motions. The Burmese were going to vote or not vote as they saw fit. We tried to follow the course of the communist insurgency but it was sort of related to narcotics as well. Basically the issues were narcotics.

We had already begun, or were in the early stages I suppose of providing narcotics related assistance to the Rangoon government. I think the agreement for that had been signed in '74 or I don't know if there was a formal agreement even. An agreement had been reached and certainly there must have been a memorandum of understanding or something like that in '74. I was not involved in that while I was in Rangoon but when I got back to the desk, one of my major jobs was to work very closely with an office at that time called S/NM which stood for the Secretariat Narcotics Matters. The special advisor for narcotics control or something like that was a man named Sheldon Vance a career diplomat. We worked very closely with his office regarding narcotics related assistance to both Burma and Thailand.

Q: From the perspective of the desk during this two year period, how cooperative did you find the Burmese on narcotics?

GIBSON: Actually we found them quite cooperative. It was in their interest. We were providing them equipment which they would use for suppressing narcotics trafficking organizations. The original purpose as I recall was to interdict caravans heading south to the Thai border. It got expanded to taking base camps and that sort of thing. At that time, as today, the political insurgents were supporting their insurgency through narcotics. That was a big debate always. Are these people ethnic political insurgents, freedom fighters, or whatever, or are they drug trafficking thugs? Our view was they were primarily drug trafficking thugs and I think that is probably still the American government's view of the group. I agree with that. I don't have any problem with that. What we were doing was giving the Burmese the opportunity to help themselves by suppressing their armed political opposition, armed insurgencies, who were trafficking in drugs, therefore meeting our objective as well. It was win-win.

We weren't particularly intrusive. The Burmese were a little bit stubborn as they would be about protecting their own prerogatives and national independence and that sort of thing. They made it very clear that they would not have a bunch of Americans running around the place looking at what they were doing with the helicopters or the communications equipment that we were providing them. This was all non-lethal stuff. We eventually provided them F-28 Fokker cargo aircraft good for moving cargo. We also eventually provided them, well after I left, with spray aircraft, like what crop dusters use, for spraying chemicals onto the opium and destroying the crop that way. It just kept expanding.

All this time the Burmese would fill in the paper work and give us reports. How accurate the reports were, we had absolutely no way of knowing. As I recall at least in the early days when I was there, they sounded reasonable and we accepted them at face value. We had no real choice. They weren't going to let us in and monitor everything which is not a particularly surprising attitude from the Burmese. That's the way they are. They are xenophobic. They guard their independence and their prerogatives but we found them cooperative enough.

We would go over there and visit and they would take us out. They would be cutting down opium fields for us, this was before the spraying. They would have meetings with my bosses and I was there as the note taker type guy. They would come over to the States and we would pay for an executive observation tour and we would take them around and meet with DEA and with Customs. In general it was a pretty good program at the time. A lot of people opposed the program.

There were a lot of sort of the predecessors of today's anti-Burmese government activists who were very much concerned that the helicopters, in particular, would be used to suppress non-drug trafficking insurgent groups. Our view at the time was non-drug trafficking groups in rebellion consisted of two: the Karen and the Mon. That was basically because they were not in areas where opium was available. We made it clear to the Burmese that this was for suppressing trafficking groups. As time went on, the Burmese by all accusation actually did use the helicopters against non-trafficking insurgents. In my time I don't recall that happening but later on apparently that happened. There are enough reports so I suspect they are true but I don't have any knowledge of that.

Q: Did the human rights side come up again at all during the time that you were on the desk?

GIBSON: Not really. You know that was still a little bit before the human rights emphasis and I don't recall human rights, while I was on the desk from '75 to '77, being an issue with the assistance to Burma. Later on when we move to my next job, it did become a bit of an issue but not much and I'll tell you why. In those days, '75, '76, '77, I don't recall it being an issue.

Q: We're moving to Thailand now from '75 to '77. There you were dealing exclusively on the narcotics side is that right?

GIBSON: Right.

Q: What was the situation then?

GIBSON: Going back to the war years and even the pre-war years from the early '50s on, we're really in bed with the Thai diplomatically, politically. We have a lot of equities in Thailand. The military bases are winding down, fair enough. But we've got a huge intelligence apparatus in Thailand for collecting data from all over that part of the world, not just in Thailand. We have a very close working relationship on intelligence issues with the Thai. Politically they back us in the UN. Economically, before the trade friction started with them and everything, we have a whole wide range of important relationships with the Thai.

Somewhere along the line, I'm not sure when, I would say it was probably in the late '60s or mid '60s, we began to start nudging the Thai on narcotics issues. We continued to approach the Thai on taking narcotics more seriously as an issue. The Thai never really took it too seriously as an issue because they didn't really see it as their problem. They had other equities in narcotics related issues and considerations which I'll explain. Mainly this is a period when we are very good at paying lip service to beating up on the Thai about narcotics: you've got to do more. The ambassador or the DCM would go in and make a demarche. With sort of a wink and a nod everybody would go home, everyone would be happy again and nothing would change. The reason was always that the Thai are trying. Whether they tried or not I can't really say. I think many Thai were trying but there were many things working against their efforts. Nothing much got done and because of all of the intelligence cooperation, political cooperation, economic cooperation and so on, we never really got on the Thai case about it.

The thing they were facing in all fairness, Thailand was not a major producing country. Yes they did grow some opium. They still grow some opium, considerably less than they used to. Through a long slow process of economic development in the opium growing areas of northern Thailand, the opium crop was being reduced. The opium farmers were being given alternatives. But the northern Thai border with Burma was basically a wide open no-man's land. There was not much there. Opium and heroin would come across into Thailand. If it was raw opium it was refined in northern Thai heroin refineries, if it was heroin it was being refined in Burma Shan State and coming in. Thailand was this great transit area for most of the Burmese opium drug production in those years. Now it is China, India, and other ways out, but in those years it was almost all through Thailand.

What we were trying to do was to get the Thai to interdict that stuff, do a better job of interdicting it, but the Thai have this basic problem. One, they didn't control their border and that was scary because north of the border up in the Shan State there was a power vacuum and political chaos. There were maybe 30 armed insurgencies running around fighting the Burmese government, fighting each other and they were all supporting themselves on the drug traffic. They all had bases on the Thai side of the border which was their logistics area, their rear area. The Thai were not strong enough basically, or did not want to commit the resources because they had their own internal domestic insurgency and that sort of thing. They did not want to stir up a hornets nest by trying to suppress these armed groups along the border. Instead they took an approach, live and let live. As long as you guys aren't messing around on the Thai side of the border, you're behaving yourself on the Thai side of the border, what you do in Burma we're not going to get involved in. Basically the Thai had very little choice. They would have had to spend a whole lot of money, deferred a whole lot of army and police resources, up into that area to bring it under control and even then the Thai army was not noted for its fighting ability and there is no guarantee they would be able to do it.

The biggest problem for everybody in this was the Kuomintang remnants that had left Burma and had eventually ended up along the northern border. Long about 1970, the Thai and the KMT remnants sort of struck a deal and this is after the Thai tried for nine years to get them out of the country. They tried to get Taiwan to take them out. Taiwan was trying to get all these guys to come back to Taiwan and disband and disarm. These guys didn't want to go to Taiwan, they wanted to stay where they were. Negotiations dragged on for something like eight years. Finally at the end of that the Thai and the Taiwanese quit talking to each other and they gave up basically. The Thai had to deal directly with the KMT remnants in their own country and they made a deal. We'll let you stay here as refugees if you act as our security paramilitary forces along the border and if you will go fight the Communist Party of Thailand insurgency in Chiang Rai Province, which is in the north. That was the deal. So you have the KMT patrolling and being the security force for the border, keeping all the smaller drug trafficking and insurgency groups sort of in check and behaving themselves on the Thai side of the border and running great drug caravans out of Burma.

That was the problem we were up against with the Thai. We all knew this. We all knew the Thai probably couldn't do much more than they were doing but we still felt obligated to push the Thai to do more. We did that for years and years and years. It was nothing new, it wasn't new policy. We sort of knew we weren't going to get them to do everything we wanted but they were trying in their own way. Eventually now they are doing a good job but it took a long time.

Q: During this '75 to '77 period, was this the period where we were keeping up rather constant pressure with no great developments?

GIBSON: Yes, basically. We kept providing assistance. We would provide helicopters to the Thai police, and communications equipment. We would pay for economic development projects in opium growing areas that of course has a spin-off of hopefully providing the farmers with an alternative to opium production. There would be a seizure now and then, a big seizure sometimes. You always had the white ant problem in that you would have opium or heroin seized and it would somehow disappear from the police storerooms which we usually attributed to white ants eating it. White ants were a problem in Southeast Asia. They eat wood, just about anything.

There was nothing big. It was during this period that there were dedicated Thai police in the office of Narcotics Control Board who were their equivalent of perhaps the DEA. They were trying hard but drug related corruption in the Thai police, to a lesser degree in the army, basically negated everything the good guys were trying to do over there. DEA was there. They had a lot of people and they worked very hard. Our intelligence people also addressed the drug issue and tried to do some things there. Not a whole lot changed. We pressured, they gave a little and tried a little harder when we pressed. The embassy basically served as an apologist for the Thai because the Department was putting pressure on the embassy to go put pressure on the Thai. The embassy would soak it all up and then become the advocate of the Thai and it was not exactly built for progress.

Q: Who was the ambassador during that time?

GIBSON: Charlie Whitehouse, an excellent man. He really is. And he was stuck. He had so many issues at stake there including the draw-down of our military forces out of the bases. Charlie didn't have any other choice, I don't think, but I bet in his shoes I would do the same thing I am sure.

Q: This is a rather crucial period in Southeast Asia, '75 when you arrived. By the time that you arrived South Vietnam had fallen. I was wondering what about the repercussions both in Burma and in Thailand, from your perspective?

GIBSON: I don't think there were many in Burma that I can recall. It is really a hermit country. In Thailand there were a lot of repercussions. By '75 we were well into our draw-down. We weren't totally out of the country yet with our military forces but we were fixing to be soon. There was the democracy movement. The old military dictatorship in Thailand was gone and you had elected governments. I think it was Kukrit Pramoj at the time. Kukrit was certainly not going to be a lackey of the Americans.

Q: He was the prime minister?

GIBSON: Yes, I think it was Kukrit at the time. They were all concerned about what's next. I mean here are the Americans, cut and run out of Southeast Asia. The Thai have to make their peace with the Chinese and with their Indochina neighbors because of their role in the war so there is this reorientation of policy going on in Thailand and part of that is distancing themselves from us. The thing that really put the cap on it was the, I can't remember the name of that ship...

Q: It is the name of a port in Puerto Rico. It was a ship that was seized by the Cambodians.

GIBSON: Right. The U.S. Marines staged a rescue operation of the Mayaguez out of a Thai air base without the courtesy of letting the Thai government know we were going to do it. That really pissed a lot of Thai off. Student radicalism was in full swing and there was an awful lot of concern over pressure from the students, the potential for riots and this sort of thing. We were sort of walking on eggs with the Thai. But the Thai establishment of course, they were trying to walk the middle line. They had such close relationship with us and had worked with us so closely over so many years that they didn't really want to cut us off and put us too far afield, but they did want to make their peace with the Chinese and with the countries in Indochina. So it was a difficult time for the Thai.

Q: Did you have any feel during this time when you were working in dealing with Burma and Thailand that the North Vietnamese or the Chinese were involved in the drug business?

GIBSON: No. That is an old allegation that got its start with Harry J. Anslinger, I think his middle initial was J. He was the federal narcotics commissioner in the United States in the early '50s and a darling of the right wing, the China lobby and the committee of one million or whatever the heck they were called. He was the one who kept saying the Red Chinese are in the drug business. They are exporting heroin, corrupting our youth, the youth of the west and this sort of thing. It was all bull shit when Harry was saying it and the Chinese government was never involved in anything like that. In fact their suppression of the drug trade was quite draconian when they got power. Subsequently Anslinger's charges were discredited.

The Vietnamese, I know nothing that would indicate they were in the drug business at all. The Laotians were a slightly different story and that really comes a little later. It comes in my next assignment. There were a lot of indications that the Laotian army was shipping out opium into the international markets for profit. Maybe personal profit, but maybe to buy stuff with too, it wasn't really clear. The Vietnamese, I'd be really surprised if that were the case.

Q: Leaving this in '77 where did you go?

GIBSON: To the new created INM. S/NM was replaced by a bureau and it was called INM, International Narcotics Matters.

Q: You were there from '77 to when?

GIBSON: From '77 to '79.

Q: Were you there sort of at the initiation of this new bureau?

GIBSON: Yes.

Q: Can you talk a little about the organizational thing? I try to capture a glimpse of how, when you set up a new organization you are obviously taking things away from other bureaus and all of that. Any views of that during the time that you were there?

GIBSON: S/NM, Sheldon Vance's organization, had some clout in the Department but it didn't really have a whole lot of clout. The geographic bureaus were dominant of course. I guess when President Carter came in there was a feeling that the narcotics issue was getting so important that there should be a full fledged bureau so the narcotics bureau could stand up to the geographic bureaus and demand that they take action. I guess there was some substance to that.

Carter's drug advisor was Dr. Peter Boren, a British born psychologist who had been close to Carter for years through the campaign and everything. He was a real internationally recognized expert on drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation type stuff. A good friend of Peter Boren's was a woman named Mathea Falco who was young, something like 32 or 33 years old. She had had some experience with narcotics treatment and rehabilitation stuff as well. When the decision was made to establish the Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, this woman Falco was selected to be the first assistant secretary of State.

Building the bureau was interesting because, I'm not sure of the personality dynamics, but basically Sheldon Vance retired and just left. I don't know if he even met Mathea Falco. Perhaps they did but if they did there was no real exchange of ideas and real help given for the formation of the new bureau. S/NM was a very small office. They had an officer for each geographic area. They didn't have much clout and they didn't really do much. They didn't have their own EX or anything like that so we had to create all of this from whole cloth. What Mathea Falco had to do was basically recruit people to come work for her which was kind of interesting.

I was one of the first people she had met because of my work on narcotics in Southeast Asia. She got me to do the Southeast Asian thing and she got various other people to do other things. They sent a guy named Joe Linneman from OMB over as the deputy assistant secretary of State. He was responsible for putting together the EX operation, the budgeting, the accounting and that sort of thing. He brought over with him two of his colleagues from OMB and they became the core of the EX. Basically Mathea Falco, me and a few of the people that she recruited became the core of the policy side of the bureau. I handled all of the East Asia stuff for that office and towards the end I became her special assistant and played with policy papers, speech writing, testimony writing, that sort of thing. As I recall the bureau was created basically through her own hard work and through the hard work of Joe Linneman. They got very little support from the established bureaucracy in the State Department, that I could see.

Q: It sounds a bit parallel to Pat Darien in human rights.

GIBSON: Exactly and Darien and Falco were buddies. I don't know where they knew each other from, but they knew each other from before. Maybe it was from the Carter campaign, or who knows. This went back to the human rights thing. With Pat Darien there, and a Human Rights Bureau also, human rights began to take on a lot more importance. We did then have to start dealing with human rights issues concerning Burma.

It's back to the thing of you're helping a military dictatorship. You are giving them military equipment which they are going to use on ethnic freedom fighters, insurgents, and that sort of a thing. Here again we tried to explain to Pat Darien that these ethnic freedom fighters are not what you think they are, they are not at all democratic. They are supporting themselves through drug trafficking. In the beginning some of them were certainly ethnic insurgents when they started, but over the years the drug trafficking basically corrupted their objectives and their goals. Drugs became their *raison d'être* rather than insurgency and independence for the Shan, or independence for the Lah, or whoever. It wasn't really a human rights issue.

I think, and this is just the impression that I got, because of the close personal relationship between Mathea Falco and Pat Darien, Pat Darien pretty much accepted our arguments. I think they were valid. We weren't trying to snow anybody and we sincerely believed that, and I still believe that today. We didn't really have much of a human rights hassle. Human rights hassle on the narcotics program with Burma came much later, in the '80s I think, sometime after I had gone.

Q: Who was the woman who got the Nobel Prize?

GIBSON: Aung San Suu Kyu. Even before she became an item there were human rights concerns.

Q: I have interviewed Pat Darien and she was talking about how she was having real problems being ignored by the geographic bureaus and all of that. At least Pat Darien had the aura of having Jimmy Carter in her hip pocket, which was not actually true, but she played this for all it was worth, and rightly so. With Falco I would imagine that she wouldn't have quite that clout.

GIBSON: She did not, although she was a delightful charming person so she went around charming everybody in the Department. This is the part I saw because I was doing East Asia, but I think she had a fair amount of influence in East Asia for a very simple reason, she owed her job to Peter Boren. The other person who owed his job to Peter Boren in the Department was Richard Holbrooke. So Richard Holbrooke being assistant secretary of State for East Asia, was amenable to suggestion and pressure from Peter Boren which made the working relationship between Mathea Falco and Richard Holbrooke a lot easier, I think as I recall, than between Mathea and other geographic bureaus. I would say that. Pat Darien and Mathea Falco both shared that sort of we're the black sheep of the family type thing. They were like skunks at a garden party. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with them because both human rights and narcotics screwed up your traditional political, economic relationships with your client countries. That was a problem throughout and I don't know if it is still a problem or not. I think it still is.

Q: I suspect so. Although you had Southeast Asia, there were two big areas and Latin America was the big one. What was your impression of how things were going there?

GIBSON: I thought things there were going pretty well. Linneman did a lot of that work. He kept building this empire. Linneman is a fantastic empire builder. I don't know where Joe is now, I think he is a consultant somewhere, but he was an incredible empire builder. He could really get things done in the bureaucracy. By the time I left, INM had its own air force: contractors, maintenance and planes. They are still around. They are all over Latin America.

In those years the big heroin threat was Mexico and so we had airplanes spraying. I went down there and I observed them. I went out in the fields with them and watched the helicopters spray poppy fields and that sort of thing. They were spraying also marijuana and that was big paraquat debate. We were using paraquat which is a pesticide that kills plants. All the marijuana smokers were all pissed off at us because it left a residue which is, or could be, a carcinogen. Here are all the marijuana smokers smoking their illegal product and then complaining because the State Department is aiding and abetting the spraying of a carcinogen on their crop. I just loved that one. We were all real sympathetic about that. The cocaine thing then wasn't quite as big as it got. We already had some guys down there working against cocaine. I thought relationships in Mexico were pretty good. They deteriorated later. In those years I thought we had a good relationship with the Mexicans. DEA guys were down there catching drugs and that sort of thing. Most of the effort was the spraying down there that we were involved in.

We had liaison officers in the bureau from DEA, from U.S. Customs and from NIDA, the National Institute for Drug Abuse. We had a drug abuse expert on loan to us over there. We inherited from USAID the old public safety office. Public safety had been discredited after the events down in Uruguay, Brazil and a few other places and so by 1977 there were just a few of the OPS guys left around in AID. It was a very small office and it was run by a woman named Mary Weller or Wells, I can't remember her name. What we did, Mary fought it all the way, we incorporated her office. We gobbled it up and brought it into INM also. I think she retired or went off and did something else with AID. We got a lot of her former cops and some of them were quite good. They became the core of our aviation organization and this sort of thing.

Because Mathea Falco was pretty close to Peter Boren, she could draw on Peter Boren's clout and he had enough clout to get to the president sometimes and so we could get things done. Between her contacts with Peter Boren and Joe Linneman's ability to work the system, we really created an empire. I think we started off with something like four people in the office. By the time I left two years later they must have had 30 or 40 people in there. I don't know what the count was but we had a lot of people. (end side 1)

Q: How about in your area was Dick Holbrooke favorably inclined to Ms. Falco? How did you find our efforts in Laos, you mentioned Laos got involved, but also with Thailand as far as getting the embassy to give narcotics a higher priority?

GIBSON: Let's start with your last question. I don't think we had a whole lot more success with the embassy then. I can't remember who the ambassador was. It was sort of more of the same. We kept helping the Thai. They would make a seizure. They would do this, and then that. There was steady slow progress on the Thai part. But they continued to support, to allow, all of these drug trafficking groups to have bases in northern Thailand and operate the drug traffic in Burma. This continued to go on, and on, and on. We just couldn't get them to stop that because of their perceived security interests, and resources, and so on. That is a short answer to your last question. We didn't get much of anything. Save the Laos one.

The Holbrooke Falco relationship was interesting. That was the period when Khun Sa, (at that time I think we used to call him Chang Chi Fu but maybe he had already changed his name to Khun Sa by then) and the Shan United Army, his group of trafficking thugs in Burma, came up with a proposal which I guess it had been kicking around for a while really. Very early in '77, or in the summer of '77, the pressure was building up. When did the new administration come in?

Q: January of '77.

GIBSON: That's right. I guess while I was on the desk we had pretty well stamped down the idea of what we call a preemptive purchase. When the new administration came in, it raised its ugly head again as a proposal and so it got a lot of attention.

Q: A preemptive purchase being?

GIBSON: A preemptive purchase being the U.S. government will buy the Shan State opium crop and destroy it and give the money to the traffickers. That keeps it off the streets. The traffickers will use the money to develop the economic livelihood of the people and to do what they have to do to help mankind in the Shan State. Khun Sa, this was his big thing, and some others had come up with this proposal before. There was some precedent because in 1973 or 1974 we did that in Thailand. We paid the KMP a million dollars to come up with 26 tons of it and burn it, and then they promised to behave themselves after that.

This preemptive purchase deal came up again. I remember this fascinating conversation I was a witness to. I and my fellow professional Foreign Service officers had convinced Mathea Falco that the preemptive purchase was a bad idea. It would not work. It would not work for a lot of reasons. One, you couldn't trust Khun Sa, Chang Chi Fu, any farther than you could throw the guy. Secondly, he did not control the lion share of the opium product in Burma. By that time the Burma Communist Party controlled the lion share of the opium product. Khun Sa may have done most of the refining but the raw opium wasn't his to sell. The thought that anybody, the Burma Communist Party, Khun Sa or anybody else, could come up with the whole opium crop was ridiculous. We reasoned that with the part you didn't get, the profits would be fantastic. Let's say you could get off 30 percent, 40 percent of the crop even. For the remaining 76 percent, the price just doubled. The other thing was that you'd be setting in a cultural support system. You set a four plied price for opium so all the farmers next year are not going to grow corn, they are going to grow opium. There are a whole lot of problems with this thing. How is it going to work and this sort of thing. Mathea Falco agreed it was a bad idea.

Peter Boren over at the White House, is a little more exposed to the crazies out there, the wild eyed idealists, or whoever, that is going to come pushing this program. There were some guys on the hill like Congressman Lester Wolf who thought it was a great idea also. There was a lot of pressure building again now to reopen this thing. Mathea Falco went down to see Richard Holbrooke one day and I was the flunky, the note taker. I was sitting there taking notes and answering detailed questions if there are any, there weren't. Richard Holbrooke said, and I am paraphrasing because I don't recall the exact words but the words were something very much like this, "I owe my job to Peter Boren. Peter Boren thinks that a preemptive purchase might be a good idea. Therefore I think a preemptive purchase is a good idea. I will go along with what Peter Boren wants to do." In other words he told Mathea that basically he didn't see any problem with preemptive purchase and he wasn't going to get out there and try to stop it.

I was astounded. I was still in those years an impressionable young Foreign Service officer. I thought that my seniors in the system really had America's interest at heart, not their own political interests at heart and this sort of thing. To hear Holbrooke say this, was a tremendous eye opener to me. It really opened my eyes. To me it just reeked of cynicism, self promotion, and all the things which I thought we didn't do in the State Department back then. I realized later we did it. Everyone was doing it. I just didn't know it. I was just too naive. It was my own fault. But anyway, I thought that was a fascinating conversation.

Not long after that Mathea Falco, Peter Boren and I went out to Thailand and Burma on a visit. On the airplane across the Pacific, Mathea and I cornered Peter and talked his ear off for the whole trip telling him why it was a bad idea. By the time we got to Thailand, Peter Boren had come around to being very skeptical about it. Then subsequently of course, Richard Holbrooke became skeptical about it. I just loved it. I will never forget that story. Anyway, I paraphrased it and those aren't the exact words, but they are pretty darn close.

The Laos thing comes up when on two different occasions I tagged along as the bag carrier, the flunky, for the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs annual meetings in '78 and '79. In those years they were in Geneva. Now they are in Vienna because the organization subsequently moved to Vienna. We had sent a delegation. There would be a couple congressmen on it. I guess Mathea Falco as the assistant secretary of State was the head of the delegation both times. UNFDAC, the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control, was a subordinate body to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs which sort of did its program work, projects around the world and those things. UNFDAC, as we called it, had now become the UNDCP, United Nations International Drugs Control Project. In the acronym the "I" drops out to be the UNDCP.

One of those times, I think it was the '78 session, UNFDAC was planning a project in Laos and they eventually went ahead with it. There was a particular mountain autonomous region, or something like that I can't remember exactly, where the army continued to have direct control, not the government. This was for security reasons because this was the Muong area and there was still concern over counter revolutionaries and that sort of thing. We had back in Washington here access to all kinds of intelligence indicating that the Lao army in this area was engaged in harvesting the opium crop or buying up the opium crop which the Muong harvested, and shipping it out to other places, via Vietnam by the way. They were doing this according to these reports. I don't know if any of this is true but they are unevaluated intelligence reports, I believe it is what they say right across the top of them. We also got it from DEA reporting, so both DEA and CIA reporting. The feeling amongst the law enforcement side of the house was that they were doing this as a matter of supplementing the national budget. It could have been. It could have been that they were doing it simply to line their own pockets, their Swiss bank accounts. Who knows why.

Anyway, I remember accompanying Ms. Falco when she went to see the head people in UNFDAC to lobby against this project on the basis that the Lao were trafficking. She shared with them some of the intelligence. Naturally it was carefully sanitized and that sort of thing. It was all oral, there was nothing in writing. She said that the U.S. government has real concerns over this because here you are going to put money, some of which will be USG money, into a project to help the Lao on the grounds that they are trying to suppress opium trafficking but yet an arm of the government is engaged in opium trafficking. We had a problem with this. There was a gentlemanly discussion at the office at the UN. Everyone agreed to disagree. UNFDAC went ahead with its project. So this was what had fired up my memory of Laos, was the question of were any of these guys, as a government policy, trafficking in drugs? I don't know if the Lao were or not but that was an event.

Q: Granted we are pulling out but god knows we had put in a great deal of effort over the decade before or so, into developing sources, intelligence, and all, in that whole Southeast Asia area designed for our war in Vietnam. Did you find that we were getting pretty good intelligence out of there or did that apparatus work for that?

GIBSON: That is an interesting question and I am not smart enough to give you a good answer. I just don't know. I can give you a couple of impressions that I have. We're talking narcotics. Eventually I am in Bangkok as a political officer and I can talk to you about the intelligence product in the mid '80s, early '80s.

Q: We're talking about this period here.

GIBSON: I didn't think it was very good, what I saw. The problem is this, DEA has snitches all over the place, confidential informants or whatever they call them. We used to call them snitches. These guys are feeding all kinds of information into the intelligence collection system of DEA. You have to remember that DEA is an agency dominated by the enforcement people. The guys that run that place are the guys who go out and make arrests, do the undercover work, bust the big guys and get the powder on the table. Those are the guys who run that place. The intelligence guys in DEA are really the orphans of the organization. They get no respect basically. There are some very good ones in there and they really understand what is going on. These guys are getting a constant flow of information some of which is good and some of which is bull shit and it is really hard to sort out what. The problem is this information never gets out because it is judicial related quite often. DEA basically tries to hide all of this stuff saying it's all case related and it may become used in a prosecutorial process at some point and therefore we can't share it with you. I didn't see very much DEA stuff then. Later I saw some only because of personal contacts, they let me peek at them.

The only intelligence I saw really was the CIA stuff, the unevaluated intelligence report and an occasional INR analytical report based upon both State Department and CIA reporting, and other things. Basically the CIA intelligence was not timely in the sense (and this was DEA's big complaint with it) that it didn't help anybody make an arrest or follow a case. That being said, it gave little anecdotes of the way the drug trafficking stuff was going on. It was interesting. Not particularly good, not particularly useful, but interesting and helpful in some ways. Not from an enforcement standpoint but from an overall understanding of what was going on and how the system worked. It wasn't bad. Earlier I said it wasn't good. I take it back. It was good, it was good for that. Are these things ever classified?

Q: No. Why don't you put it in and take a look at it. Put it in. You will get this as a draft. Take a look and you can put it any way you want. I think it is better to put more in than not.

GIBSON: In that period we had the capability, and they probably knew that we were doing it, of monitoring communications between some of the trafficking groups. We could follow their caravans because they were on the radio to one another. These were big caravans with something like 200 or 300 mules and horses, a couple hundred armed guards and they are moving, they are gathering stuff.

Q: Your friend and mine Clyde McAvoy said that they used to put the homers in those saddles.

GIBSON: I don't know about that.

Q: I remember that he said that one time.

GIBSON: What we could also do was monitor the radio communication. As I understand it, the Chinese were pretty slick, the KMT guys, because they had guys being trained in Taiwan. They had codes and they were really tough ones to break. But a lot of the other ones we could track their caravans as they came down and then we would tell the Burmese army where they were. They would take those helicopters, ideally, and go get them. It is easier said than done because the terrain is terrible up there. I think eventually the traffickers got wise and they would have guys over here sending false radio signals and that sort of thing. We were doing all of that sort of thing and that is part of the intelligence collection effort. That, I thought, was a pretty good effort. I had some friends who were doing that and that seemed to be useful.

Q: In '79 you left INM and where to?

GIBSON: I spent a year trying to learn Thai. No, wait a minute, while waiting for the class to open, I did four months in the Board of Examiners. I had a ball.

Q: What was your impression of the candidates who were coming through?

GIBSON: Good. I thought they were good candidates. I did four months. It was from late spring to late summer or something like that.

Q: These were candidates that would be Foreign Service officers?

GIBSON: Right. I remember an interesting thing and it may have been generational, it may have been background. What are those personality profile tests that we all take? I have taken them so many times I can skew them to be whatever I want to be. Well the ones that they give all the State Department guys, I come out all the time that my profile fits five percent of Foreign Service officers but fits like 90 percent of military officers. That is my profile. I am that kind of a guy. I am a westerner, poor background, just kind of laid back kind of guy. I am in the Board of Examiners with all these guys who are the thoughtful, reflective, typical Foreign Service officer profile from Harvard or Yale. Back in those years it was still mainly the prestige schools. I am on these panels with these guys and the thing I remember is that the people coming through, men and women, who I wanted to hire, (I was given the oral exam, I had nothing to do with the written exam) these guys were all dismissing as cowboys, especially when we got out west. I'd take a couple of trips to L.A. and one to Denver. Some of the people that I thought would be fascinating to have in the Foreign Service, these guys were just dead set against. I was the junior guy and so I lost every argument but I remember that interesting conflict. Even so, I thought we were bringing in some pretty good people.

I remember I fought them on a couple of times. There was this woman in Denver that I wanted to hire. Her father had died and she had taken over the running of a ranch. She managed the ranch. She did the books, the crew and everybody and she managed to go to a good school. She had a good degree, high GPA. Now her brothers were taking over the ranch and she was going to leave and do something else. A cowgirl. She wouldn't make it in the Foreign Service. I bet she would have. She was a terrific person. Another one out in California, the guy was a wine maker. He was the wine maker for Zaca Mesa Winery in California and a graduate of California Davis, UC Davis, in wine making, oenology, or whatever it is called. The guy was fantastic. But no, we don't need wine makers in the Foreign Service, this sort of an attitude. Anyway, I thought we were bringing in pretty good people.

That was also an interesting period though. I had some interesting experiences there because I would also occasionally be called upon to be a part of a three person panel that would evaluate minority hires who had been brought in under a system which doesn't exist any more. They had been brought in outside the exam system entirely on a five year probationary thing. Frankly the screening wasn't very good. I am sure that some of them turned out to be very good officers. Many of them were not successful. At the end of the five years, their progress would have to be reviewed. I remember sitting in on some of those panels. You would look at some of the personal statements from some of the people as to why I want to be a Foreign Service officer five years after I have been employed. Some of them were fine and we approved them. Others had bad files. Their rating officers had not thought highly of their work. Their own personal statements were filled with typos and misspellings, grammatical mistakes, things like that. It was really interesting. My colleagues and I, our impression was we felt really sorry for these people because the State Department screwed them. The State Department went out and grabbed these people who weren't going to make it. They should have realized that they were not going to make it in the system. They sort of chummed them on, led them down the road and five years later put the ax to them. It was a bad system. I'm glad they got rid of it.

Q: I had some reflections of that supervising and all of this. It was poorly done and it was really one of these things that was designed to be done in a hurry to make it look like we were really responding to a definite need and that was to bring in more minorities, particularly blacks.

GIBSON: Yes, I'm talking about blacks.

Q: But having no follow through and not getting, you might say, the cream of the crop. To put them up against really the cream of the crop just wouldn't work.

GIBSON: It wasn't fair to the candidates.

Q: We were picking up some very good people at the time, sort of like your cowgirl or your wine culturalist, who would probably rise to the top in any organization anywhere. They proved themselves once and we really should be going after these people.

You took Thai really sort of from '79 to '80?

GIBSON: Yes, I took it at FSI.

Q: How did you find this? You are giving me sort of a laughing glazed look.

GIBSON: How about root canal with no anesthetic? I am not very good at languages and it was for me like pulling teeth. Not only that, and this is an interesting thing, apparently up until the year before I started they had a method of teaching Thai at FSI which stressed the tones because after all it is a tonal language. It's got five tones and if you botch a tone, no telling what you are going to be saying. You are going to make a complete fool and entertain the local people you're talking to. They used to teach it with a transliteration into English characters with all the little accent marks and this sort of thing. The people who took it under the old way, really had good pronunciation and good tones but they found that they were having trouble reading because they weren't exposed to the script until well into the course.

What they did with the group that I was in, right from day one we were dealing with the script. We did almost no work on tones and they de-emphasized the sitting at the booth listening and repeating with the tapes. They de-emphasized all of that and it was much less structured. You'd sort of sit around in class and you would just sort of say what you think you want to say and you don't do drills and this sort of thing. If you put Thai in an unstructured situation they're not going to do anything because they are just laid back folks. It was all very pleasant. We all had a good time but none of us learned anything. Some of them did. There were some success stories out of the class. Eventually FSI went back to the old way of doing things.

I can remember when I got to Thailand people saying to me, you know all the words. I had a massive vocabulary. My friends who had taken Thai under the old way, they would say to them you speak Thai clearly, meaning you have the tones down. Whereas my group came through and we had this huge vocabulary and we could read fairly well but our pronunciation wasn't much. We had a lot of catch-up work to do once we got to the country. I am not very good anyway and even if they had done it the tonal way I probably still would have screwed them up.

Q: You were in Thailand from 1980 until when?

GIBSON: In the summer of 1980 I went to Songkhla which is in south Thailand. It was a small consulate in south Thailand. In '82 I moved up to the embassy in Bangkok.

Q: You were there from '82 to?

GIBSON: From '82 to '85.

Q: Let's talk about Songkhla. Could you describe in 1980 what the place was like and then we'll go on to your work.

GIBSON: Songkhla is on the Gulf of Thailand and it borders on Malaysia. It is a small port which has been expanded since I was there. At the time it was a small fishing port. I don't remember how big the town was but it wasn't very big at all. There were very few westerners living there. It's about a 30 or 40 kilometer drive from a place called Hat Yai which was, and is, the economic commercial center of that part of Thailand. Hat Yai is connected by road and railway to Malaysia. Songkhla was a delightful place, sleepy, laid back little place. The consulate was quite small. There was me, an American PIT locally hired.

Q: A PIT is a part-time intermittent temporary, part-time employee.

GIBSON: 39 hours a week job. There were about half a dozen State Department employees. There were three Thai employees of USIA/USIS so I was concurrently the branch public affairs officer as well as being a consul. There was a DEA office around the corner from me that had three agents, one American secretary and various Thai employees. Our communications was done by radio. We would transmit telegraphically. We would punch tapes and then send it by radio to the embassy in Bangkok. The guy that ran the communications force was a Thai air force major on loan from the Thai military, a hold-over from the old days when we were working very close with the Thai in the south on insurgency issues and that sort of thing. It was a sleepy, very pleasant place.

Q: Why did we have a consulate in a sleepy, pleasant place down in southern Thailand?

GIBSON: To provide Dick Gibson with a nice assignment. The history of the thing was it was a holdover from winning the hearts and minds during the insurgency period.

Q: We're talking about the communists in mainly Malaysia?

GIBSON: No. There were three insurgencies in the south when I was there. You had the remnants of the Malaysian Communist Party insurgency which was pretty much dying out. They had a few guys and they were all holed up on the Thai side of the border. The Thai, like in the north, weren't doing much about it. They weren't bothering the Thai. Then there were various groups of Muslim separatists which were often confused for bandits. There wasn't much difference. Then there were remnants of the Communist Party of Thailand because while the Communist Party of Thailand in the north and the northeast was almost defunct by 1980, 1981, 1982, (they were really on hard times) the ones in the south were flourishing because the root causes of the communist insurgency in Thailand were addressed in the south more slowly than they were addressed elsewhere: official corruption, official bullying of the people and that sort of thing, mistreatment of the poor folks. There was this big collection of them and they were all on the wane when I was there. At one time the communist insurgency down there had been really big.

Songkhla originally was a branch public affairs office of USIS going out and showing films without psychological warfare, so it went out with the Thai and that sort of thing. Eventually it became a consulate. I'm not sure when, but I think it was in the early '70s. When I was there the justification for having it was we're just finishing up the insurgency and that sort of got wrapped up while I was still there. I remember going to see some of the big victories. After a big victory my Thai army buddies would take me up there. We would tour the area, they would show me all the captured weapons and all this stuff. It was all kind of fun.

More importantly, that was a period with all the boat people from Vietnam coming over to south Thailand. Malaysia and south Thailand is where they would make shore. There was a UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, run refugee camp at Songkhla just south of town on the beach for the Vietnamese. There was a massive piracy problem going on there. The Thai fishermen were doing all kinds of really bad things out there on the water to the Vietnamese boat people. We then started an anti-piracy program down there. It turned out that while I did a lot of reporting on the dying insurgency, the most important part of my work while I was there was looking after the protection and welfare of these refugees. That is why we still had a place there. We have since closed it.

Q: Could you talk about the boat people?

GIBSON: It was an interesting thing. I had a philosophical problem with the refugee situation. These people, and you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to be around them a bit, were not political refugees by and large. I'll tell you about a survey that I did on that. It was clear that they were economic migrants just jumping to the head of the cue by coming across by boat. I had real philosophical differences with that which got me cross waves with Mort Abramowitz, the ambassador up in Bangkok, who was very sympathetic to the refugees. I am sympathetic to their problems. I am very sympathetic to the things that were happening to them on the water. In fact I was one of the big supporters, pushers, and activists in the anti-piracy program to make the Thai fishermen stop what they were doing to the boat people. I also had real problems with this idea that these were all political refugees and we should all put them on the next big bird to Orange County.

To give you an example, at some point during my time there my PIT assistant and I, working with the UNHCR guy, a Frenchman Alan Foley, a great guy, used UNHCR boat arrival records and we would take boats as they would come in. We would select them. Some boats would come from say the Delta area and others would come from somewhere else in the south. They would sort of represent this group of geographical regions from where they set out from quite often. Not entire so, but generally. We selected boats that were largely ethnic Chinese and largely ethnic Vietnamese. They were all Vietnamese of course but Sino-Vietnamese versus Vietnamese. We would then select off the registers people by age, by sex, to try to get representative samples. We did extensive surveying with interpreters and looking at the record what they had told the interpreters and everything to try to determine why they are coming. It was clear that probably ten to 15 percent could qualify as political refugees. Probably another ten percent were sort of marginal, pretty hard to tell. The rest were clearly economic migrants or young people dodging the draft or auto mechanics, seamstresses, wanting to immigrate for the same reasons our ancestors wanted to emigrate from wherever they immigrated from. But they weren't political refugees.

I wrote all this up, outlined the methodology and everything. In those days we sent everything up to the embassy and then the embassy transmitted it to Washington. I sent it up by pouch. Before I sent it up by pouch, somebody from the refugee department came to visit. There were two of them that came to visit me and I get them confused. One was Ship Lowman who was a DAS, I think, in the refugee bureau. I can't remember the other guy's name. I think it was Ship Lowman who came to see me and I explained to him what I was doing. He was checking on refugees doing his thing and I told him about all of this. He looked at me and said, "Well, that's not policy." And I said, "What do you mean that's not policy? Policy, you want reporting right?" He said, "No, but our policy is that these people are political refugees. If I were you I would not send that report."

I am stubborn. The minute somebody tells me not to do something, okay, I'm going to do it. I just sat there and I was stunned. Basically here is a senior officer from the Department telling me that I can't report something that is going on because it is not consistent with policy. It's the emperor's new clothes, that type of thing. The minute he left, I called the DCM, Burt Levin. He's a wonderful guy. I just think the world of Burt. I said, "Burt, here's what happened." He says "You send that report." I sent it up. It sat and sat in the embassy. They didn't know what to do with it because they didn't want to send it in. Burt didn't have any problem sending it in. It's reporting. It doesn't mean it is true, as I later said.

It was all up there and what was going on was somebody in the refugee section called the Far Eastern Economic Review and told John McBeth about this. At the time, the Far Eastern Economic Review was carrying a big piece on the refugee issue and one of the simple figures in it was from an American USAID officer in Singapore who basically had sent a report saying the same thing that I was saying and got creamed for it. His career was finished. He found out that my report was saying basically the same thing. I didn't even know this guy, there was no collusion. It was just what was going on. McBeth wrote a little squib from Bangkok after the story telling that the consulate in Songkhla had sent this report up saying something along the same line but it had been spiked by the embassy and it wasn't being sent out. Of course the ambassador and the head of the refugee operation at the time, Lionel Rosenblatt, had thought I had done it. I didn't call McBeth. I got to know McBeth later and we got to be good friends. Every now and then over a couple of beers I would ask him "John, who the hell told you about that." He'd say, "I can't tell you."

What they eventually did was Rosenblatt rewrote key parts of the cable and changed basic conclusions to tone it way down and distort the facts and editorialize and everything. They sent it in with my name at the bottom. I knew I was in trouble but I'm stuck with it. I sent a cable up to the ambassador saying Mr. Ambassador there seems to have been a mistake here because the cable that went out under my name wasn't the same as the one I had written and here are the differences. He basically sent me a short gram back telling me to shut up and that he is the ambassador and has the right to send out any cable that he wants, which I never argued a bit. My position was that they could have done a lot of things to that cable: tore it up, use it for toilet paper, forgotten about it, sent it as was, or sent it as was with a note or comment from the embassy saying Gibson has been in the jungle too long and he's lost all touch with reality and he's full of shit. Any of these options would have been fine with me but to change the basic conclusions and to leave my name in the text as though I had written those conclusions really ticked me off.

Q: This is illegal.

GIBSON: It was certainly improper, if not illegal. As the ambassador I imagine he has the legal right to do whatever he wants and I never questioned that. Anyway, they were really going after me. Then they thought that I must have been the guy that leaked it to McBeth. Burt, bless his heart, phoned me on the phone and he said, "Dick, I'm asking you, did you leak it?" I said, "No." "Do you know who did?" "No." If I knew I wouldn't have told him anyway but I didn't know and I still don't know to this day. I have a suspect who denies it. So Burt ran interference for me and meanwhile Abramowitz transferred. By the time that I got up to the embassy in Bangkok Abramowitz was gone. To Mort's credit, while I was in the political section in Bangkok about a year-and-a-half later and he was with ISA over at the Pentagon, he came through on something. I met him and he was totally gracious to me. No hard feeling held or anything like that, but boy I was angry.

Q: I don't blame you. Let's say that distorts the ethics of the thing. You can do whatever you want but you don't falsify somebody's reporting. You just don't use it.

GIBSON: The reason I bring that episode up was to show that the refugee business, I mean business because all these various organizations getting grants from the federal government, it had become a growth business. People like Lionel Rosenblatt who I'm sure is very well meaning...

Q: I know Lionel. I knew him in Vietnam.

GIBSON: I'm sure he was doing what he thought was right. It shows that we had just lost touch with reality in our refugee program which I thought was too bad.

Q: This is tape three, side one with Dick Gibson. You were still down in Songkhla.

GIBSON: I would like to talk about the anti-piracy program. Let's do the anti-piracy program and then pack it in for the day. Because of the piracy problem down there where, I'm sure everyone who has read the papers know all the horror stories that have been going on and I don't think they were exaggerated. There were really terrible things happening there. I used to go up and down the Gulf of Thailand coast in the south tracking down stories, talking to officials, and talking to fishermen. The fishermen were really a hostile crowd. They weren't interested in talking to me at all. I would talk to officials and everything and they were all in to denial and minimizing. But you would occasionally find a Thai official who would sort of level with you as to what was going on. I was sending in all these reports. This was what was so funny because of this stink over the refugee cable that I described. I was getting attaboys from the Department refugee people all the time because I was describing these atrocities. At one point I had heard about a boat full of refugees being machine gunned, and then I found the boat on the beach with bullet holes all through it and this sort of stuff. I kept getting these attaboys. Then all of a sudden, one ah shit cancels out a hundred attaboys. It was one of those kind of deals. Anyway, it really was a problem.

When I was down there the embassy negotiated (all the negotiating was done up in the embassy, I wasn't a part of that) to establish an anti-piracy program where we would cooperate with the Thai navy. We would pay them basically to stage anti-piracy patrols out of their naval base at Songkhla. They have a little naval base there run by an admiral who is a great guy and we got to be close friends. As part of this program we gave them two O-2 airplanes. An O-2 is a push-pull, made by Cessna. I forget the civilian name for it, it is not an O-2. An O-2 is a military term. We used them in Vietnam as an airport control aircraft a lot. It had a propeller in the nose and one in the tail with a twin broom thing that pushes, push-pull. Anyway, we turned over two of these in Songkhla to go out to patrol for refugees in distress and to look for things going on that shouldn't be going on. We gave them a 95 foot refurbished former U.S. Coast Guard cutter which we sort of overhauled and sent across the Pacific to them. I think it was UNHCR that got into the act also and provided them with about a 50 or 60 foot patrol boat. It was a fast patrol boat with guns on it and stuff like that.

The first admiral down there, Wattana Pom, really seemed sincere and interested in chasing down the pirates unlike most of the cops around there, they didn't much care. They don't like Vietnamese anyway. The Thai don't care much for the Vietnamese. He was pretty good. He did some innovation. He developed the idea of the old Q boat concept from World War I.

Q: Fake freighters which submarines would surface to capture and then the sides would fall away and they would shoot at them. The British used these.

GIBSON: Wattana Pom came up with the idea on his own. I would like to take credit for it but I couldn't. He got a couple of refugee boats, because there were plenty of them around that had beached and left or had been towed in by the Thai navy, he got them all painted up and they sort of looked like real boats. He had a bunch of his guys in something like pajamas or funny hats looking like Vietnamese. They would go out and patrol for pirates. In the first couple of months, they got a bunch of them. There were a couple of shoot-outs. Of course all of the sailors on board had M-16s and so there were shoot-outs there. They made some arrests. That lasted about two or three months then by that time all up and down the coast the grapevine had identified the Q boats and their characteristics and where they were going to patrol and that sort of thing so it didn't do much after that. It showed a lot of initiative on his part.

The use of the patrol boats just astounded me, their non-use. They had the speed boat, the one from UNHCR. It would go out and cruise around. I don't think they ever caught anybody. The 95 foot Coast Guard cutter, you had some real potential there because that is a ship. It has some good sea keeping capabilities and you can go out and stay on it for a few days. That ship would go out and come in. They would never spend the night at sea. I said to the admiral one day, "If you take this Coast Guard cutter and you send it out for say like a weeks patrol and they cruise up and down in the Gulf there and you get way out there, you are liable to see some interesting stuff." He looked at me and said "Overnight? The men would have to be away from their families? The seas get rough at night and it is a little more dangerous out there." He just couldn't see how that would make any difference. I said, "How do you think that that boat got from the United States to Thailand? No one put it on an airplane. It came all the way across the Pacific. That ship, the 95 footer, is perfectly capable of patrolling in the Gulf of Thailand for a whole long time." He just couldn't see to do that. He was a little embarrassed about it so it may have been his orders from above, they weren't going to give him the budget or whatever it was I don't know. But it was real funny because that ship never really got used to its full potential. Then he left after the first year. He left and was replaced by some guy whose name I can't remember who didn't have any interest in the program at all. When I left, there wasn't much left of it.

Q: What about the insurgency down there, did we play any part in it?

GIBSON: Not to my knowledge. I was reporting on it and tracking it but not many people were really interested in the insurgency down there. By that time obviously the Thai were going to win and the insurgencies were a nuisance but not any kind of a threat to the body politic in Thailand. I used to follow it because I like that sort of thing and because I had a lot of buddies in the Thai army down there. We would go out. I got a kick out of it. I followed it and probably most people didn't read what I sent up about it. They weren't that interested in it. As I said, there were three insurgencies: the Muslim separatist group, the Communist Party in Malaya, and the Communist Party in Thailand. They were all around.

There were a lot of places we couldn't go at that time. Brigandage, banditry, roadagitry, whatever you might call it, was a real problem down there. A lot of places, even the main highways, you didn't want to drive on at night because of the chance of being hit by a road block of guys with M-16s wearing military uniforms. They were called paramilitary rangers that the Thai used a lot against the insurgency made up of local thugs rounded up out of the villages, unemployed youth and this sort of stuff. It was sort of like the old days when juvenile boy teenagers got in trouble in the States, you could do a year in the boys home or you could go into the army. Oh, I think I'll go into the army. That's the kind of guys they were. They would moonlight by holding up trains. The train from Bangkok to Hat Yai was frequently being held up. It got so bad that while I was down there, there were police units riding the train to protect against being held up by train bandits. The general feeling was a lot of the bandits were these paramilitary guys because they had M-16s and they would be in fatigues and stuff. They would claim to be insurgents of this group or that group. Security was sort of bad.

I got several death threats, a couple of them by name. This was during the period when our guys were in Iran, the hostages were there. In the south of Thailand there are a lot of Muslims and so Muslim groups would occasionally send me death threats. A couple times I sent my family up to Chiang Mai for three weeks, a month one time because I got this note one time saying they were going to kill my family first and then they were going to kill me. When they were generic addressed to the consul, I didn't pay much attention, but these were addressed to Mr. Gibson and so I took them a little more seriously. It was interesting. I did not drive my official car on trips. When I wanted to go out I'd drive my personal car and I had fake plates so that they wouldn't be blue and they wouldn't show up. I'd put them on and just drive my car. I had a little Nissan that I drove around. There were some bad areas.

I remember visiting one time the governor of Prang Province. The month before I visited him, he had been out in an area just out of town where there used to be a special forces training camp where U.S. special forces used to work for the Thai and now the Thai were doing it by themselves. Out in that area, he got ambushed. This was like a month before I got there. He wanted to show me the place but he didn't want to go in his own car so we got in a Cadillac Gage V150 armored car and we rode out. He wanted to show me where he was ambushed. The communists were still messing around. These were Communist Party of Thailand who did this. Then just before I left in the spring of '82 there was a big communist base area left in Surat Thani Province and the Thai went in there and cleaned them out. That was sort of one of the final big campaigns in the south and it pretty much broke the back of what was left of the communists. They weren't much of a threat, they were just a nuisance. It kept you from driving around.

Q: We'll pick this up the next time in 1982 when you left your post down south in Thailand and went to Bangkok.

Today is the 23rd of April 1998. You were in Bangkok from '82 until when?

GIBSON: 1985.

Q: What was your job in Bangkok?

GIBSON: I was in the political section. The political section was divided into two units, an external unit and an internal unit. I was chief of the internal unit.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

GIBSON: John Gunter Dean. I am trying to think if he was already there when I got up, or if he was en route. I think he was already there.

Q: How did you find him as an ambassador? How did he operate?

GIBSON: I am one of those who liked John Gunter Dean and have a great deal of respect for the man. It seems like people either really like John Gunter Dean or really dislike him. I think he was an extremely effective ambassador. Why was he an extremely effective ambassador? He had a very good ability to identify the people in the Thai government that he had to know and work with. He was able to cultivate them. He is a consummate bureaucrat in the sense that he knew where the centers of powers were and what buttons had to be pushed to get things done. He also at least projected a rather patrician air which I think helped him in getting in close with the royal family. He was very close with the royal family in Thailand. He was constantly on the go. I've never seen anyone put in the hours that that man did. There was not an evening that he did not go to at least one, but it was usually two or three different functions. He was very visible in the capital city. He also liked to get out to the countryside so he really got around. I think he really had a sense for the power structure in Thailand and how things worked, at least in the capital. The problems with the ambassadors, and it has always been this way in Thailand, is they get out in the countryside but that doesn't mean they can understand how the countryside works. It means that they have had a program set up by the consul and this sort of thing.

He ran his embassy as a pretty tight ship. He seemed to have a very thorough grasp of everything that was going on within the embassy. Aside from that, I guess maybe these are things that helped him, his ego was out of sight. I mean the man has a degree of self confidence which quite frankly in my mind I don't think anyone should have. But here again this helped him in his work. He understood very well that he was representing the most powerful nation on earth and he was not afraid to play that part. He was a bully to the people in the embassy. If you got on John Gunter Dean's list you were in a hurt locker because he treated you like dirt. On the other hand if he liked you, if he respected you, or if you stood up to him I found that all of sudden his whole attitude changed.

I still recall a time when the political counselor had been gone for three or four weeks with back trouble and I was acting chief of the section. We had a big hall, a common area, and we all had offices off the common area. My office was way in the back because I liked it way in the back and out of the way. The ambassador's office back door was right around the corner. He came in one afternoon and grabbed some poor soul who had done something which displeased him. He just began to berate this poor officer, just thumping all over him. I heard all the commotion and came out. I went up to him and looked him in the eye and said "Mr. Ambassador what he did is what he was told to do. I am the one who told him to do that because I thought those were the instructions from the front office. It is me that screwed up and it's me that you have a problem with." He just sort of looked at me. It just took all the wind out of him and he sort of harrumphed a little bit and walked away. I thought, oh god, I'm dead now. Just forget it, I'll be on the next flight home. It had a tremendously positive effect on our relationship. After that he would call me into his office. Here's how he operated, everything back channel. If you read the front channel traffic from Ambassador Dean you didn't have a clue as to what was going on. It was all just basically reporting stuff.

Q: He sounds like Graham Martin in a way, out of the same school.

GIBSON: I don't know him. I know who Graham Martin was but I never met the man. He would then call me in for his back channel stuff. He was either a terrible drafter or he didn't care because he always had flunkies around like me, for example, to clean them up. What he would do, he would dictate back channel stuff to his secretary. His secretary would give him double spaced text. He would call me in, not on a daily basis but once a week or so, and he would say, "Dick, take this and sit down over there and clean it up a little bit. It is something I dashed off to the secretary." I would go sit at sort of a meeting table in his office. I would sit down. He'd say "No pride about it do whatever to clean it up." I would think, what a mess. I'd start marking it all up, clean it all up and give it to him. He'd say "Thanks." I think what he said now was, "This is between you and me. Don't even tell your section chief that you are doing this." Yeah, right. I went to see my section chief and I said this is what is going on. I am sworn to secrecy on the text of what I am doing because obviously he doesn't want anyone else to see it. But I'll tell you what, if I ever see anything that affects you personally or anything that affects something that we're very much working on and it's going to screw everything all up, I'll let you know. My boss, what's he going to say. It really paid off because if you got on John Gunter Dean's bad side you were in trouble.

There was one point in my time there with him, the editor of The Nation newspaper, a man named Suittoo Chai Yuan, I still remember his name and he is still the editor that's why I remember, wanted to meet with me. He's a Thai fellow. The Nation is an English language newspaper in Bangkok. Suittoo Chai Yuan has a degree from one of the Ivy League schools. The Nation is actually quite good and he's quite a nice fellow. At the time, the Thai were negotiating with the Americans to buy their first lot of F-16s which frankly they needed like we needed another hole in the head. They wanted prestige.

Q: Yes, in case they were challenged by the Burmese air force.

GIBSON: Yeah, right! Or the Cambodian air force or something! Of course the Vietnamese were all upset because an F-16 can destroy them, or at the same time, the later models could reach Hanoi, Haiphong and get home. I don't know how they could with any kind of a bomb load. At any rate, Suittoo Chai Yuan wanted to have an interview about that because in addition to be chief of the internal unit, I was dual-hatted as the embassy's pol-mil officer. Suittoo Chai Yuan set this up with USIS. The USIS public affairs officer came over, a man named Dick Virden. Dick Virden is over here at Georgetown on some kind of a boondoggle where he is a scholar, diplomat in residence or something like that. So there is Dick Virden and Suittoo Chai Yuan and there is Dick Gibson.

The three of us are sitting there and we talked about this. I was rather frank with him with what was going on. Basically the thing I said that was really for background only, which we made very clear, was that we were supporting the purchase. There was a lot of debate within the Thai government as to whether they were going to buy these things or not, do we need them or not. Our judgment had less to do with whether they needed them or not, as much as one, keep the Thai military happy, they are your friends, and secondly somebody, whoever makes an F-16, McDonnell Douglas or somebody, is going to make a lot of money. So it was all a great deal. At the end of it Dick Virden reiterated to Suittoo Chai Yuan the same thing that we had told him in the beginning, that this is for background only and not for any attribution and so on, and so on. Suittoo Chai Yuan looked at us and said "Yeah, but you know I think I want to attribute this last part about the embassy supporting the purchase. I think it is very important and I want to use it." We said, "No you can't do that." He said, "Yes I can." So he walked out and sure enough it was in the paper the next day.

The way the policy was, we were publicly very neutral and we were not letting on that we favored one side or the other. What this did of course was it blew John Gunter Dean's cover. I just expected him to come in and cream me. Well, he didn't. A day went by and I didn't see him. Then we passed each other in the stairwell one day, two or three days later, and he smiled at me and gave me sort of a shit eating smile, sort of a snicker. He said something, and I don't remember his exact words, but it was something to the effect of "Nice interview Dick." He never said another thing to me and I attribute it only to the fact that I happen to be on his good list. If I had been one of the guys that he didn't like, I would have been pilloried hanging by my thumbs, or something like that. He's quite a guy and I really liked him.

The story is knowing how he ended up being ambassador to India afterwards too, against the Department kicking and screaming. It goes back to this guy being such a consummate bureaucrat. He knew exactly who was going to make decisions and how things got done. When Mike Deaver, the White House chief of staff, was in Bangkok doing preparation for the president's visit which never happened, it turned out it got canceled, the ambassador got a hold of Deaver and really just won Deaver over. He ended up being ambassador to India despite the Department's objections. Anyway, I liked him. I thought he was an excellent ambassador.

Q: We've already talked about the situation down in the south, how did you find Bangkok as a political entity? I mean operating in Bangkok for you?

GIBSON: For me it was a piece of cake except for just traffic jams and stuff. But I was not at a level in the structure and organization where I would have any problems. I was low enough down and in the trenches so to speak so that my work was not difficult. People I wanted to see on the Thai side always saw me. That was not a problem. We had very good relations. I didn't work a lot with the Foreign Ministry because that was on the external side but when I would be acting in the absence of the political counselor I would have to go over to the Foreign Ministry sometimes and make a demarche on this or that and they were very gracious. I was frequently in the prime minister's office. This was in the days of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda. Prem's staff and I got along very well. They were very helpful and very cooperative. I did a lot of visit organizing, scheduling of VIP visits of one sort or another and everybody was always very gracious and always very helpful. I found it very easy to work with the Thai. I didn't have any problems.

Q: What was the political situation in Thailand from '82 to '85.

GIBSON: I wish I could recall the sequence and dates a little better but when I was there the major domestic political issue was a new constitution. There had been a coup attempt in 1980 and Prem had rallied the loyal forces and driven the coup plotters out.

Q: Was it a military coup?

GIBSON: Oh yes. It had been a couple of years since the coup so we had to do that. Prem was the knight on the white horse and he came in and drove out the bad guys, typical Thai. Prem ended up as prime minister and in my book he is probably the best prime minister Thailand has had in probably the last 20 years anyway. There had to be a new constitution drawn up. The body politic was in Bangkok which in those years was basically the body politic for the entire country because that's where the elite lived. It is a little bit lesser today but still largely true. The debate was over the new constitution and the real issue here was what was going to be the role of the military. Prem had retired and had become a civilian but he was still a soldier at heart. There was an interim constitution wherein the Senate was composed of appointed people appointed by the king in theory. It is like the Foreign Service list which gets sent up to the president and he signs it after everybody gets it. Something like two thirds or three fourths of all the senators were all serving active duty military officers. They had basically full veto power over anything that the elected lower house wanted to do. That was the way that the military and the old guard kept control.

These terms were due to expire in something like 1985 and they had to straighten it out by then. They had to come up with a permanent constitution. The debate is what are we going to do with all these soldiers in the Senate? Naturally the democrats wanted to see the Senate elected and they wanted to see its powers trimmed so it could not veto whatever the lower house wanted to do. The power elite wanted to keep it the way it was. Then there was the issue of can you be a cabinet minister without being a member of the elected lower house? Could you be a cabinet minister while you were a serving military officer? These sort of issues were all floating around. It was basically who was going to run the country after the new constitution takes effect.

At the same time there was a rising challenger, a general named Arthit Kamlangek. The old thing about a modest man who was much too modest. He had much to be modest about, but he wasn't a modest man. He was commander and chief of the army and he was obviously taken with himself. He was very out in public all of the time. He was a bit of a populist, always grandstanding and coming out with lower taxes, more for the working people as he loaded money into the Swiss banks or whatever he was doing. It became clear that he was challenging Prem basically, and there were a constant series of coup rumors that Arthit was going to make a coup and he was going to take over. There was a lot of focus on who in the army were his supporters and who in the army were supporters of Prem and also by direction of Chavalit Yongchayudh who was recently the prime minister in Thailand. So there was a lot of attention on this and a lot of people thought that Prem was either going to have to sack Arthit or Arthit was going to try for a coup. As it turned out Prem did not sack him and Arthit did not try for a coup and eventually rode off into the sunset. But this was the main focus of attention back in those times.

Q: I would think that it would be in a way difficult to be a political officer where so much of the body politic decision making was made in military circles.

GIBSON: Professionally in that sense, that was a bit of a challenge. In truth the people in the DAO (Defense Attaché's Office) and in JUSMAG (Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group) in Thailand, had far better access than most of us did to the military naturally. What helped me in doing the internal politics is that I was dual-hatted as the political-military officer which automatically made me a participant in a whole lot of events so that I got to meet a whole lot of military officers. Our military officers did not always like having me around but they were sort of stuck with me because it was in my job description. Despite the reluctance of some of the more senior U.S. military officers to cooperate closely with me, I got on very well with some of the other ones. I basically got on with DAO and the boss of JUSMAG didn't like me a whole lot but his subordinates did and so I basically had access to all these military guys which was a big help to me. I also was helped by having two very, very good officers working for me. They had a lot of energy and were always running around and meeting people. They didn't meet the military guys. I was meeting the military guys. These guys were meeting the right kind of civilian politicians. So it wasn't a big problem. It would have been a problem had not the DAO guys and sort of the second level down guys at JUSMAG been cooperative. Had they chosen not to be cooperative with me, it would have made my life miserable probably.

Q: What about at the top of JUSMAG, was this sort of endemic to the situation that they were going to be dealing with troop to troop and this political crap wasn't their business or something like that?

GIBSON: It may be personalities. It depends who you get running the place. JUSMAG has had an interesting past. During the Vietnam War years, JUSMAG was run by a flag officer and they were clearly the preeminent military presence in the country. They were into everything and had great contacts with supreme command and this sort of stuff because they were providing goodies for the Thai, so they had great access. Whereas the DAO guys, they are the spies. Everybody knows them as spies and there is a little bit of arms length up here. At the same time, the DAO guys know the right questions to ask about politics and a lot of time the JUSMAG guys didn't. Anyway, what you had was a general officer and then it fell off. The boss was always army. Army is the preeminent service in Thailand so it made sense. Then it became a colonel slot. After I left it went back up to being a flag officer slot for a while and now it is back down to just a colonel slot. Meanwhile DAO is always headed by an air force 06, an air force colonel. At the time I was there we had a stubborn bull headed air force 06 running DAO and we had a stubborn army 06 running JUSMAG. Why didn't he want to cooperate with the embassy? I think it was he had a personality problem and he didn't like civilians: weenies, striped pants, cookie pushers. He felt that it was none of their business what's going on, this is our operation, that sort of thing.

To complicate it further, the DAO and JUSMAG didn't get along at all because they were both the same rank and they both had different bosses. DAO reported to DIA and JUSMAG reported to CINCPAC. There was always this tension and rivalry between those two guys. Those two guys would never cooperate. They didn't even like sitting in the same room with one another while their staffs did. You get to the next level down and it was okay.

Q: That's usually how it happens. You let the big boys play their games and life goes on.

GIBSON: They have to cooperate to get their jobs done. I am told that this was not a situation unique to the time I was there. I am told that this has been a problem in JUSMAG/DAO, JUSMAG/embassy relationship for years and years and years. Of course it is all dependent upon personalities.

Q: It's not just to Thailand, this is across the board. What about some of the other factors in the internal political situation. What about the little d democratic party? What was your impression of them and contact and their effectiveness?

GIBSON: These comments will apply to today as well. Basically they are not very effective. Why are they not effective? For a whole lot of reasons. One of the reasons is there are so damn many of them. New parties are born, dissolved, split, allied, disallied. It is almost that you can't tell the players without a program. Because there are so many parties, it dilutes political power in the electorate (and we'll get to that in a minute) so that your governments are always coalition governments. This forces you to have a huge number of cabinet posts and deputy ministerial posts. I think there are always at least two deputy ministers of everything. It means that a party of modest size in your coalition, like any parliamentary system, can hold you up for some really choice seats. Then they get the choice seats and of course they milk them for all they are worth and give your cabinet a bad name. But you need them to stay in power because they will simply move over to the other side.

We are not talking ideology here. In Thai politics there is no ideology, there is only what is in it for me, what's in it for my party? Changing political alliances is very easily done. Why is there no ideology? In Bangkok you have the closest thing to an ideological commitment on the part of the voters and to looking at party platforms as opposed to individuals and so on. You get out into the country where most of the Thai live and where most of the MP's are going to come from, they are in areas where basically it is local godfathers, local political godfathers, sometimes gangster godfathers as well. Quite often it's the same. Where ideology is not an issue the issue is, can you persuade the voters to vote for you? Can you buy the vote with cash or can you intimidate them through your henchmen at lower levels? Or can you bring public works or somehow money to that district?

Generally you find a very conservative countryside and they end up being elected to parliament but their loyalties are very shallow. Their loyalties are basically to themselves or to maybe three or four others in a click, or in a group. You will find even within a political party that may look kind of large on paper, there will be factions within the political party that at any given time and set of circumstances, can cause the party to split and move over and ally with an opponent or simply make their own party. So parties come and go.

You find a few major political players who because of their wealth basically, and influence, are able to hold parties and coalitions together over the years. Guys like Chatchai, the current guy, Chuan Leekpai, who does it because he's just, I think, a tremendously good man at least in the Thai context, and Banhan, Boonchu. There are some big political names over there that always can sort of hold things together and they are always political players. Because of the system also, there is no grassroots politics. There is no grassroots movement like we know about. The political parties, at least when I was there the only exception was the Democratic party, don't maintain offices at the constituent level. In between elections, there is no party presence in any of the provinces and districts out there. In some of them the Democrats would have offices in major cities. There is no identification or loyalty to a party. It is loyalty to a political figure who happens to be the political godfather of your province.

Q: Patronage.

GIBSON: Patronage, that's the term. The other thing is, the MP's do not have a staff system like we do. They don't get a stipend for keeping an office in their home district and for hiring a staff to go out and take care of constituent complaints and this sort of thing. When I was there in the early '80s, this was unknown in Thailand. If you are wealthy enough you could do that. You could have your henchmen, your political subordinates down there, sort of ward heelers and this sort of thing. But they weren't really staffed as such. They tended to be more local figures, either a local businessman or a local politician like the mayor or somebody on the mayor's council or the provincial assembly or something like that, who would sort of serve as your helper in the provinces and you would make frequent trips back.

You didn't have that office system so there is no grassroots, there is very little ideology, there is not deep loyalty to a party. As a result the parties were not particularly effective and the establishment in the military could always manipulate them. They could intimidate, threaten a coup, sow discontent, sow discord of one sort or another and sow confusion by making political statements, by getting their allies in the lower house of parliament to say one thing or another. If all else failed, the house knew that if they passed something the soldiers didn't want, the Senate would veto it. It has been like that forever and I'm not sure of the current situation. I was away from Thailand and back, then away again. It seems to me that under current reforms the senators are actually elected now and I don't think you can be a serving military officer anymore in the Senate. That's until the next time a coup takes place I suppose.

Q: I would think given this sort of amorphous thing and then you have your establishment, you have the military, for a political officer dealing with internal affairs what were you concerned with and what were issues that would come out of this parliament and this political system that affected the United States and how would we predict it?

GIBSON: None of it was going to affect the United States because there were no ideological differences. It is not like if one group got in, policies would change because there is no ideology here. There was a general political consensus that you will move in this direction. One of the aspects of that political consensus was you will keep good relations with the United States. If coalition X is in power today and all of a sudden tomorrow there is a big political upset and coalition Y is in, so what? From the standpoint of American interests it is probably not going to make much difference. We weren't under any pressure to sort of influence the outcome of elections and we never really tried to my knowledge. What we would do, we would report. We would say this is what is happening, and this is probably what is going to happen. What does it mean for us beyond, not a whole lot.

Q: Here we are in '82 to '85. South Vietnam fell in '75 and this was not exactly a shining moment for American policy in Southeast Asia. Did you have the feeling by this time that had the influence and the looking towards the United States in Thailand, wavered for a while and had (end side 1)

GIBSON: Right after Vietnam in '74/'75 you had the civilian government. In '73 the military clerk was overthrown and you had a democratic government in power. As things were falling apart in Indochina and we were leaving, the Thai made a determined effort to start mending fences with everybody in the neighborhood like the Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodians and so on. That started really in the '70s. There were anti-U.S. riots and everything but that passed pretty quickly. By the early '80s there was no anti-Americanism or there was no lingering repercussion. The only thing that you had to keep in mind was that now the Thai were very concerned about the Vietnamese in Cambodia because the Thai don't like Vietnamese much, they never did.

The Thais had good friends in Beijing so there was this Thai-Chinese cooperation and good relationships which wasn't there in the old days but it didn't get in the way of the relationship with the United States that I ever noticed. The Chinese were aiding the Khmer Rouge through the Thai. The stuff would come in through Thailand and be shipped across the border to the Khmer Rouge. That is one of the sad parts about Pol Pot kicking off the way he did. We can't grill him. We can't get him into court to see what really happened and of course a lot of people are quite happy about that.

Q: Pol Pot just died last week.

GIBSON: But basically the Chinese were their main supporters.

Q: What was our attitude towards the Khmer Rouge? They were known as sort of the most odious regime of the 20th century which really is something and yet the Vietnamese were messing around in there.

GIBSON: It's not an area where I worked. My impression that I left Thailand with in '85 from my colleagues in the political section was that at the time there were three rebel groups: the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF (don't ask me what it stood for), and Funcinpec, Sihanouk's guys. Sihanouk's and the KPNLF were sort of an alliance, a coalition. They the Khmer Rouge were all against the Vietnamese. We were in those years putting our money on the KPNLF. We were sort of keeping the Khmer Rouge at arms length although we knew very well that the Thai were allowing aid from China to pass through to the Khmer Rouge. My impression is later on well after I had left, that it wasn't there any more as KPNLF and Funcinpec, they fell apart. We began to accept the Khmer Rouge as the only viable anti-Vietnamese force and I guess we probably were closer to them than we should have. I found it a strange twist in policy that these guys were such villains and we find ourselves, in order to get to the Vietnamese, sort of backing them. I don't know if we ever aided them or not. That's not an area where I was aware, but I know that we took a much kinder view of these people which I attribute to the fact that there were still too many bad losers from the Vietnam War who felt that since we lost in Vietnam we were going to get those bastards.

Q: At that point it didn't make too much sense.

GIBSON: Of course not. Sometimes you win wars and sometimes you lose them and you've got to get on with your life. Before I skip it, part of the deal with the Thai allowing the aid to the Khmer Rouge was that the Chinese would quit supporting the Communist Party of Thailand and the insurgency in Thailand. In the early 1980s, which was when we were watching, not closely but we were watching, the Communist Party of Thailand insurgency basically fell apart. That was a big factor. It wasn't the only factor but it was an important factor that the Chinese agreed to quit aiding them. I don't know if that was ever written out anywhere but that was their accepted quid pro quo.

Q: Incidentally when looking at the map of Thailand, Thais are more powerful than the Burmese, why the hell haven't the Thais taken over that very thin stretch along the Indian Ocean?

GIBSON: I think they did at one time. Historically at one point the Thai owned that part then the Burmese whipped them fair and square and took it. Then the Brits came in and the Brits solidified the border basically and I suspect that that is probably why.

Q: I would have thought there would have been a logical port on the Indian Ocean.

GIBSON: Moulmein and Mergui, there is.

Q: Do the Thais have a free port or something?

GIBSON: No. They don't need it but in the old days they did. It is Mergui or Moulmein, I forgot which, that used to be ruled by the Thai and there was a very famous Greek adventurer who was their customs agent for the Thai king there back in the 1700's or 1800's, I forget. But then the Burmese won it back and before the Thai could take it back again the Brits came in. That would be my guess as to what happened.

Q: Going back to the political stew of Thailand, what about students, were they a factor?

GIBSON: Not during my time. They were obviously in the early '70s. They brought down Thanom and his gang of thugs and opened the way for democracy. It was a brief period of democratic government before there was another coup and before the military took over again in the person of Kriangsak Chomanan. In my time the students were not particularly obnoxious.

Another big issue at the time was succession. There was a lot of talk about who got to succeed the king because the king's health was not good at that time. He was suffering from some ailment. The crown prince who because of the Thai clause of succession was and is in line to be the next to be the next king, is very unpopular in Thailand, extremely unpopular. The king's eldest daughter married an American and opted out of the system basically. The king has a son and three daughters. The eldest daughter is married to a foreigner and therefore she is ineligible to take the throne. The next sister is very, very popular with the Thai so there was always a lot of toing and froing about what does the succession really say? Can it be interpreted to such that the king can somehow disinherit his son, which he can't. There was a lot of turmoil about that but nothing ever got done. The crown prince is still going to be the next king as far as I can see.

Q: Why was the crown prince so unpopular?

GIBSON: I get to edit this out right? He's sort of an asshole, generic type. He is a bully, a womanizer. Naturally he had an arranged marriage. He has since divorced her and then he took a mistress who was a well known movie star. He had three or four kids by her and he engineered it so that the illegitimate kids had royal titles. He would travel around and be seen with his movie star mistress and stuff like that. It caused a lot of embarrassment, unseemly behavior. Apparently he is a terrible bully. He bullies his staff and physically beats them. Of course none of them will hit him back, this sort of thing. He is just not a very nice man in the popular image. On the other hand the daughter is just a gem.

Q: In your internal politics did corruption raise its head? Was this sort of the mother's milk of Thai politics?

GIBSON: Oh, sure. Actually I was there during Prem's time and when Prime Minister Prem was in office, corruption was largely kept in check. All Thai politicians and officials do things that are okay to do in Thailand which would land them in jail in the United States. You've got to realize cultural differences. It's a different set of rules. In the Thai context, Prem was Mister Clean and he set the tone in his government and so, while corruption is a way of life in Asia, in the Prem years it was held largely in check. Yes, it was there and it was there in business dealings and major contracts and everything too. Here again this was before the economic miracle of the little tigers, or whatever it was. It was just on the verge yet so you didn't have these massive infusions of funds and that sort of thing. For example on a contract, like an arms sale, yes, there was money leaking out all over the place. Any big investment in, say, telephone where you've got foreign money coming in, there was money leaking all over the place. At the higher levels of government, it just wasn't the problem that it became in later years.

Speaking of arms deals, there was an interesting case and I can't remember the guy's name. I was actually allowed to testify in a Thai court and the Department waived diplomatic immunity so I could testify in the court. The issue was that a Thai general in the procurement system, had procured from the United States through FMS a bunch of small arms. There were M-16s and M-203s as I recall which is an M-16 with a grenade launcher on the bottom.

Q: We're talking about assault rifles essentially.

GIBSON: He bought these things through the FMS system and he had to forge a whole bunch of documents to do it including documents with some U.S. signatures on it. The weapons disappeared. We sort of all thought at the time that they ended up in Indonesia. Where they went from Indonesia, who knows, perhaps Indochina or Cambodia. Nobody knew where they went. The trail died. It was a typical case of corruption and the guy made a lot of money out of it and everything but on this one the Thai army went after him for some reason of which I'm not really sure. It was sort of a typical corruption case. The guy was convicted and he was fined. He was probably severely punished. I think he was transferred or put in an adjunct post or something.

That is the nice thing about the Thai military and the police, when you are caught red-handed in corruption and in doing wrong things, they will punish you, they'll transfer you or give you an inactive position. It doesn't mean they are going to take your salary away or anything else, but they transfer you. I don't know if this is true in the army because I think in the army it is a little more on personal relationships, but in the police you basically buy your job. For instance when I was in Chiang Mai at a later incarnation there, to be a traffic policeman in Chiang Mai it cost 80,000 baht. You as a private or a corporate Thai policeman, had to pony up 80,000 bucks as an investment. Once you're a traffic policeman, presumably you are going to make your 80,000 back with interest. So if some guy is paid 80,000 which is small scale, take a colonel, or a major, or a general, he's paid big time for whatever job he had and then you transfer him, you just broke his rice bowl. That is punishment in itself I suppose if you are cynical enough to look at it that way.

Q: In '85 you left Thailand.

GIBSON: Yes, and spent the next two years studying Japanese.

Q: Obviously, you had grown up in California, you have an ethnic Japanese wife. Did she speak Japanese?

GIBSON: No.

Q: I was going to say, it is almost embarrassing to look Japanese and you don't speak the language.

GIBSON: Her dad did.

Q: I assumed you applied for this. What pushed you to it having just gone through not too long ago the Thai process?

GIBSON: I just wanted to be in Japan and after my experience in Burma which was the only country that I served in where I did not speak the language, I said to myself I am never going to serve in another country where I don't speak the language. I wanted to go to Japan but I didn't want one of the jobs in the embassy where you didn't need the language. It is no fun to live in a foreign country if you don't speak the language.

Q: How did you find Japanese?

GIBSON: Extremely difficult. A poke in the eye with a sharp stick starts to look pretty good after a few months of Japanese. It's the hardest language that I've ever attempted and linguists say Japanese and Korean are supposedly the two most difficult languages for a native English speaker to learn. I believe it. They have incredibly complex grammar. Pronunciation is a piece of cake. That is not a problem. It is not like Thai, where the real issue gets to be pronunciation. With Japanese, the grammar is incredible and, of course, there is the vocabulary. The American unabridged dictionary is about six inches thick. I don't know this for a fact, but I am told by linguists that a Japanese unabridged dictionary would take up a whole book shelf. They have just a tremendous number of words and an awful lot of those words sound an awful lot alike. Then, of course, you've got all the little characters. It's quite a mess. I was never very good.

Q: My other question was, is it a situational language? I'm not sure if it is the right term but in Korea the language you used depended who you were and whom you were talking to: above you, below you, male, female, and all that.

GIBSON: Japanese is that way but what the Foreign Service Institute does, it teaches you the middle level, your basically polite conversation amongst equals on the theory that you are a diplomat and you don't have to worry about it. It is sort of an all purpose polite level and if you use that level you can talk to anybody. As an American diplomat, you are fine. I will make a couple of comments, observations, on the Japanese language program which I thought was really good. They were able to make guys like me speak it passably well, well enough to do my job. They deserve a real attaboy for that. Compared to the Thai section when I studied Thai, the Japanese were much more business like, much more organized, pushed harder, a lot less fun but they did the job a lot better. I thought my three-three in Japanese was better on a relative basis, than my three-three in Thai. I thought the Thai wasn't really a three-three though they gave you a three-three. I could do more with my Japanese than I could with my Thai as a three-three, that's what I am trying to say.

I think there are some problems with the program though and I think I was a prime example. In 1985 I was 43 years old already. Do not take people at 43 years of age and invest that kind of time and money into them, as much as I was enjoying it. I wanted it so I was quite pleased but it makes no sense in a bureaucratic situation. I think you've got to get younger people and do it. I think the other thing you've got to do is somehow demand a high language aptitude. The personnel system has subverted the old system where you had to have a decent language aptitude. Now, and I was in personnel, we just assign people. If they don't have the language, too bad. That person is going to Ankara. You are going to teach him Turkish. I would see where FSI didn't really like that but they acquiesced. I think in the Japanese program in particular, there really should be a level of screening for the aptitude level. I don't say MLAT is the answer because I'm not sure that test is all that good.

Q: There is a test that has been used for a long time...

GIBSON: It's MLAT isn't it, Modern Language Aptitude Test?

Q: Yes.

GIBSON: It's indicative.

Q: Whether they use Farsi or something like that.

GIBSON: Kurdish I'm told. My MLAT score when I came into the service was 66 which is sort of okay but it is not particularly good. They used to say the cutoff for hard languages was 65 but it didn't matter because it all became moot because of the changes in the personnel system. It goes all the way up to 80. Most of the people I was studying with in Japanese were up in the 70s. The difference between their aptitude and my aptitude in the middle 60s was night and day. I really think the system is wasting their time on guys like me. I loved the heck out of it.

Q: Did your wife pick up Japanese?

GIBSON: No. She's not going to study that stuff, she was raising kids, having fun.

Q: In '87 you went to Japan?

GIBSON: Actually in '86 I went to Yokohama for the second year. The first year is here and the second year is in Yokohama. In Yokohama I went with my son, and my wife and daughter stayed in Falls Church. Yokohama was for about nine months and the idea of ripping the whole family up to move there didn't appeal to us. My son needed adult guidance. He needed somebody bigger and stronger than him so he came to Japan with me. We were in Yokohama for about nine months or then we came back and picked up the family, packed out and went to Okinawa.

Q: You were in Okinawa?

GIBSON: Yes. From '87 to '89. I was the political military officer there.

Q: What was the situation on Okinawa from the American perspective and all when you arrived in '87?

GIBSON: The seeds of what happened three years ago or so were well planted. The friction between the local Okinawan populous and the American military was very real. The political strain on the island was leftist and not necessarily anti-American but anti-military. They didn't like the Japanese military either so it was sort of an anti-military attitude. It sort of got twisted around to be anti-American in some ways, although I think that is overplayed. I think it is just anti-military. They said, quite correctly, that we have all these American bases on Okinawa that are taking up a lot of the good land, and there is not a whole lot of land. I recall the population of Okinawa is maybe 1.2 million or something like that, most of whom are on the main island. On the main island nearly 20 percent of the land area is taken up by U.S. bases. I think it was something like 15 percent for the Okinawan prefect on the whole but on the main island I think it was close to 20 percent or maybe it was 15. I forget. Anyway it was a sizable part and a lot of it was right down in the heavily populated areas.

You always had incidents in addition to the economic issue, the idea that if we can get you out of these bases we can develop shopping centers, convention centers, houses, whatever, there were the irritants. Nineteen year old Marines are not necessarily the best diplomats that we can send abroad and most of them are single. They are rowdy and obnoxious and they did a lot of bad things.

Then there are always the training accidents. When I was there, in the village of Kim there was a big hoopla because the Marines that were training there with live fire were not always shooting in the right direction with their live fire and the bullets would land in this village. Usually no one was killed or hurt, but there would be spent bullets around, through a window, or something like that. There was another case where a taxi cab was driving down the west coast road and from the east coast where we were doing some training (there is a mountain range down the middle of the island) a 50 caliber bullet went over the mountain range and shot the guy's taxi cab. It didn't hurt him, but it put a big hole in his taxi cab. Sometimes pieces of airplanes would fall off, like a sonar-buoy. A sonar-buoy is just a little thing, it's not really going to hurt anything unless it hits you. Sometimes an extra fuel tank would drop off, empty usually.

At times helicopters would have to have emergency set downs. They would be flying around and all of a sudden the red lights come on and the pilots would look for a school yard, or a flat area to put their helicopter down. Whether it was going to crash, that's an overstatement. That was the view of the Okinawans; the plane almost crashed, they just barely got it down. What it was were the warning lights telling the pilot that procedures had to be followed and had it been in a combat war situation, he probably wouldn't have landed there. Still they have to set down.

Then there is the constant noise from the jets taking off and landing and going right over populated areas. You add to all of this, at least when I was there, a total insensitivity on the part of the American military commander to the irritations they are foisting upon the Okinawans. One of the greatest expressions, the first time I ever hear it, when the Okinawans would complain about the roar of jets right next to their house or right over their houses, "that's the sound of freedom". Right. Anyway this was the attitude.

I still remember this one thing. PACAF, Pacific Air Force at Kadena Air Force Base, had an F-15 pilot who was their sort of regional demonstration pilot. He was a tremendously good pilot. A 26 year old kid out there with a 40 million dollar airplane having a ball. What they would do was every Wednesday afternoon, or maybe Thursday, this guy to keep his flying skills honed, would get up over Kadena Air Base and start doing his show routine which included full power climbs, screaming dives, spins and all this neat stuff which of course is making a racket like crazy. Apparently he couldn't do it over the ocean because with the horizon and the ocean, you're asking for trouble. If you do it over land the pilot can see what he is doing a lot better and he lives longer that way. The Okinawans would complain. Why do you have to do it over Kadena Air Force Base, can't you go and do it anywhere else? Why does it have to be right here in town? Kadena Air Force Base was surrounded by town except on one side where the ocean is. But the embassy said to him we finally, you know the embassy nagged them enough and they finally quit I guess.

I'll give you an example of the insensitivity of the U.S. military. The Okinawans attitude toward nuclear bombers and everything too, the B52, is not positive. There is this famous picture at the officers club at Kadena Air Base taken during the Vietnam War. It's a composite photo pieced together from a really wide angle, showing something like 105 B-52s lined up at Kadena. Until reversion in '72, that was a major bunch of bombers going over to Vietnam all the time. The Okinawans just absolutely didn't like that. They are all anti-war, anti-military because of the destruction that was wrought upon them. We had this one general who presented a proposal from Pacific Air Forces, I don't know where it came from, that as a public relations measure, the air force would send a B-52 to Kadena Air Base and put it on static display and they would have with it a mock-up of a nuclear bomb. How nice!! It is scary enough that some idiot thought of this in the first place but then it was scary that the initial reaction from the U.S. military in Okinawa was "Yeah, we could probably do that. It might be a good idea." Naturally we, the embassy, everybody, jumped all over them of course and they backed off but it showed the attitude.

Q: I think this is an important thing. I take it that as the political military officer there you were dealing with a hostile power, the American military.

GIBSON: Not hostile. We just had different viewpoints. Socially, personally, it wasn't an issue. It was kept on a professional level by and large.

Q: This has been a constant refrain of people, not in other places but for some reason our military on Okinawa seem to lack the sensitivity that has been drilled in military officers throughout Europe, they really understand this. But marine officers that rise to the top are considered by people who have been to the war college, as being really better than the air force as far as understanding sensitivity, being more politically aware.

GIBSON: The top marine officer when I was there until right towards the end, was a guy named Norman Smith. He had a two year tour and came and went almost at the same time as me. He was totally insensitive. I think he did fairly well after that. I think he got his third star. He was a nice man, gracious socially and everything, with a good sense of humor. Just a good guy, but he was totally insensitive to the Okinawan concerns. Either insensitive or he just rejected them as that's the price of freedom. We are here protecting Japan and if you don't like it, well, you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet, that sort of attitude. And it ran down. His successor I understand was different and his predecessor was a little different too. There were two air force generals when I was there who were both one star. They both struck me as rather insensitive about the noise issues and things like that. They didn't seem to care. It was just this overall attitude of we're here to protect you and we have to do this.

I think there were seven marine generals on the island when I was there and they ranged the full gambit from jerks. They had one, who shall remain unnamed, who was an aviator and a complete jerk. Then you had guys like (can't remember name). He was one of the slickest guys I had ever seen and could be an ambassador anywhere. He was very sensitive, very intelligent, Scottish by birth, immigrated to the States as a teenager. Bob, I'll figure out his name. He was tremendous and really sharp. There was another guy who was a colonel at the time, Colonel Zinni. Now I think he is a three star general and is really big in the Marine Corps. These guys were really good and very sensitive. They would fit the mold you are talking about, but there were a bunch of other guys who were just sort of jerks. A mixed bag.

Q: What did we have, a consul general there?

GIBSON: Yes.

Q: Who was the consul general?

GIBSON: A man named Spence Richardson.

Q: How did our consulate general work?

GIBSON: His view, rightly or wrongly, was that the most important thing to him was a good relationship with our military people there. He kept good relations with our military people there.

Q: I would imagine the embassy would be breathing heavily because obviously they had other fish to fry and I would assume that sort of the mainland Japanese people would use the Okinawa situation to play up, it's dead (or big) news.

GIBSON: It would get the press whenever anything happened of course. Unlike in Thailand where the ambassador is the boss, in the relationship between the embassy and the military in Japan, the ambassador is not the boss of the military over there. The setup is different. The commander of the U.S. forces Japan is a three star and I think almost always an air force officer. Basically when the ambassador is dealing with him, he is not quite like an equal. The ambassador in the end will win but he can't just order these guys to do something. You've got to work with them and you've got to persuade them. Whenever you are talking about constraining their ability to train, you are getting very close to the bone with those guys because they have seen in Okinawa as well as the rest of Japan, a steady erosion of their ability to train and to be prepared to fight wars. They resent that so I think that is probably why they will fight anything that they see as a curtailment on their operational abilities and on their abilities to train. The embassy has to pick its battles very carefully. That is my view from someone in the trenches.

Q: I would have thought that there would have been more shuttle flights of airplanes and all over to Korea to do this stuff with the Koreans. They kind of like to have American military around.

GIBSON: A lot of the Kadena Air Force Base wing that was there, the first air division or whatever it was called at the time, (I think it went back to wings but it was a division at the time) always had F-15s forward deployed to Osan. They always had forward deployed units over there, and they had RF-4 phantoms as reconnaissance birds. They were always over there fooling around. I think it was a function of cost to take those F-15s, fly them all the way to Korea and play all the games. With the per diem, the fuel and all of this, I think it was a cost factor.

I was thinking that I had come from an environment where the ambassador was god and if he were a smart man like John Gunter Dean, he could have his way. John Gunter Dean used to sometimes get generals in his office and chew them out like buck privates. He was just incredible. The military knew from the minute they walked in the door, they were not John Gunter Dean's favorite guys. John Gunter Dean was boss and he let everyone know it, whereas in Japan it's that different relationship. It is a much more cooperative, give and take relationship.

Q: Was Mike Mansfield the ambassador still?

GIBSON: Yes, I guess he was the ambassador while I was there. Just as I was getting ready to leave, Mike Armacost came and replaced him but basically it was Mansfield. Mansfield was a nice old man and he wasn't going to go to war with the military. I don't know what Armacost did, I had left.

Q: Besides working with our military, what else were you doing?

GIBSON: That's about it.

Q: It sounds like a full time job.

GIBSON: Oh yes. I'll tell you how things worked. You had asked what the consul general did and what was his thing. This was a fascinating system. Whenever a local community had a complaint with the military, the military had a policy that the military does not see civilian protesters. In other words if Kadena Air Force Base is making too much noise for the mayor of Kadena, the mayor of Kadena can not take a protest note over to the air force general next door. That's nice. The consul general said that these are all leftists doing the protesting and they largely were because most people on the island are sort of leftist. He didn't want to get involved in it because he had more important things to do, which he did frankly. As pol-mil officer, I was the duty receiver of protests.

It was sort of seasonal but it was frequent that there would be protests. It was so Japanese it was just incredible. They would come to the consulate and they would sit in our conference room. There would always be a lot of them and we would have no cameras, no recorders and this sort of thing. They would come in all dressed up in coat and tie and very polite including sometimes a communist, sometimes a socialist, and whoever. They would present me a protest letter. I would welcome them with a few words and this sort of thing. The best Japanese I had was welcoming people and telling them I was glad to see them, good relations and all this stuff. Then the leader of the delegation would read the document word by word and I would follow along. I had my FSN over here to keep me straight and narrow. They would read it all and then they would sit back. I had this spiel about how we understand exactly, this is a very sensitive issue and very important to our relations and we want to be good citizens here on the island. Usually the delegation would be from a local town or village so there would be more than one party represented. The lead guy of each party would insist on saying a few things and I would nod understanding about half of what he said but with my FSN telling me the rest. At the end I would thank them all for coming, shake their hands and lead them out the door. It was all very ritualized. I would then take the protest note and pouch it up to the embassy and fax a copy over to the marine base commander, or to whoever the appropriate guy was. That is how we dealt with protests. We'd just take them all upstairs to the embassy.

Q: During this time the Soviet Union was going through Gorbachev's period and things were beginning to change. Were any of you thinking about maybe time is running out for Okinawa as far as a military base?

GIBSON: Yes. The military were aware and they didn't want to hear about it. They said we are here not because of the Soviet Union. This is Okinawa. This is not the guys up on the mainland. We are here because of the Korean Peninsula. Just because the Russians are starting to lighten up is not an indication that all is well on the Korean Peninsula. They are right of course. Their point was we're here to fight on the Korean Peninsula and to project power into Southeast Asia and so on. That was their position and so they didn't see that as meaning they had to pack up and go home.

While I was there, there was the continuation of long protracted negotiations on reducing the size of our bases and turning over unnecessary bases back to the Okinawan land owners. I was the consul's representative on the meetings up in Tokyo with the working level military guys on this. Occasionally some Japanese military guys would come in, the Defense Administration Agency. They were civilians but they ran the bases. We were doing that and I think as I understand after I left, we did turn over a couple of places and a few years later we turned over some more and this sort of thing. It is an ongoing process. We had a lot of bases there on Okinawa and a lot of areas which we were not using but the military still didn't want to give them up because they might need them. They are right, they might need them. The land issues were tough.

When I was there we put in motion to give back a couple of places but they weren't very big, it was an ongoing process. There were areas that had been turned back before I got there, in a couple of cases years before I got there, that still weren't fully developed by the Okinawans because then the problem became, you turn these land areas back, April 1945 took care of most of the land records on the island. Once you get an area cleared of the Americans, you go in and tear down all of those structures and everything and sort of prep it for doing something with it, then you have to sort out all of the land ownership records and that was an incredibly complex task. It would tie things up for years and years. There were two pieces of land in particular that had been turned over five or six years before I got there, and they hadn't done anything with them because they couldn't sort out the land records. It's very complex, the whole land thing in Okinawa.

Occasionally on a military installation you would put a little fence around an area about the size of this room. That land belonged to somebody who refused to sign the lease to let U.S. forces use it. They were anti-war landlords so they would just fence off their area and that was their little piece of land and we couldn't use it. There were many landowners who were getting much for the land that we had for our bases that wasn't really worth much, and on the open market it would not have been worth much to the landowners. But because of the money that the Japanese government was paying to the landowner as rent for us to use those bases (we weren't paying for those bases), that made the landowners want to keep the Americans there. So you have this split there. Meanwhile you have a lot of the American military people convinced that they are the backbone of the economy.(end tape 3)

Q: This is tape four, side one with Dick Gibson. You were saying that the economy was about ten percent of...

GIBSON: Most American military commanders, their subordinates, and even privates and their dependents, believed that without the American military presence there, the Okinawan economy would shrivel up and go away. You'd ask them for a guess of how much the U.S. presence contributed, and they would say three quarters of the total GDP, or something like that, of the island that we contribute to. They all really believed this. I pointed out to them that it was really down to around 12 percent and that was an eye opener for a lot of them. There was still this mentality among the American military there that this was sort of our area.

Q: We conquered it, it's ours, I think that was the attitude particularly when the reversion came.

GIBSON: There was a lot of that attitude there. The fact that a lot more Okinawan and Japanese got killed than Americans got killed there, didn't seem to interest them much. In fact the biggest casualty figures came from the Okinawan civilian population. There was that attitude.

Q: Dick we'll pick this up the next time in 1989. Where did you go?

GIBSON: I got to go back to Thailand, to Chiang Mai.

Q: You mean after two years of Japanese and all?

GIBSON: Back to my comments on the system. I eventually got back to Japan for a second tour but there was no guaranteed mechanism. I remember when I first came in they used to say that if you study a hard language, a one country language, you have to assume that you are going to do two tours there. Right. I had to fight like crazy to get my second tour in Japan. There is just no system for doing that today.

Q: We'll pick this up next time in 1989 you're off to Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Today is the 18th of June, 1998. Dick, 1989 we're off to Chiang Mai and you were there from when to when?

GIBSON: 1989 to 1992.

Q: You were principal officer there?

GIBSON: Yes.

Q: Chiang Mai of course had great renown at one point because when we were running our operations against Vietnam, it was a major base area wasn't it?

GIBSON: I think you have that confused with over in the northeast. We didn't have a base there, we had a MAG group. I think we helped fund the construction of a 10,000 foot runway in Chiang Mai and the Thai have long had an air force base there that shares a runway with the civilian airport. I think all of the missions over Vietnam, Laos, and so on were all run out of the northeastern part from Udorn, Ubon, Korat.

Q: What was the history of Chiang Mai as a place, and then we'll get to what you were doing?

GIBSON: Chiang Mai historically, I guess until about the first couple decades of the twentieth century varied between being an independent principedom, fiefdom of a prince, that sort of owed allegiance, and paid tribute to usually the Thai but then at certain periods the Burmese had it. I think the city itself was found something like 700 years ago but it has changed hands. It's been Thai, it's been Burmese, it's been Thai, it's been Burmese. I think the Burmese had it until sometime in the eighteenth century and then the Thai got it back. There was a ruling family up there who was pretty much on his own until somewhere around the first ten or 20 years of this century the Thai crown in Bangkok sort of made him an offer he couldn't refuse. He sold out for a stipend and the northern area was incorporated into the bigger Kingdom of Thailand.

Q: Why have we had a post in Chiang Mai for so long?

GIBSON: We opened it in 1950. Actually the compound that it is on is owned by the royal family and it is rented sort of for nothing. It is the former residence of the last ruler of Chiang Mai as a independent kingdom up there. We opened it in 1950 which is about the time in the chaos of the post-World War II period that there was a lot of trouble up in Burma. That was when the Chiang Kai-shek remnants had come down into Burma and had occupied it and there was a lot of fuss and trouble up there. That was when we opened up Chiang Mai.

Chiang Mai was really opened in its early years, and even to this day, more than anything else because of the Golden Triangle drug business. In the early years it was used as a support base for our operations with the KMT, the Chiang Kai-shek remnants. As that died down, it was always used in training Thai police, training Thai military intelligence operations run out of there and to all kinds of places, including China. The CIA used to run intelligence operations from there into China. It has mainly been a CIA post for years and years until recently that's been being cut back as I understand. It's an open secret that the CIA is there. Everybody in Chiang Mai knows it. We were there for drugs.

Q: Would you explain what we were doing in this '89 to '92 period?

GIBSON: What we were doing then is much of what we had been doing for years out of there. The post had five U.S. government agencies there: State, Drug Enforcement Administration (still does), USIS, CIA, and U.S. Air Force. USIS wasn't involved with the drugs much and neither was the Air Force who was up there at a seismic station which they worked with the Thai navy. Other than those two, the other three, CIA, DEA and the State operation there, were primarily there because of the drug trade.

I say the drug trade because in those years, in previous years, and to this day, much of the drug production out of Burma comes down through Thailand, transits Thailand. The DEA working with Thai police, and I guess the Agency guys helping out too, have largely eliminated refining of drugs within Thailand proper. The refining was done in Thailand and the drugs were brought down through Thailand into the international market. There are all kinds of cooperative efforts up there between DEA and CIA and the Thai police and the Thai army in trying to suppress, or interdict these drugs. State had a fairly large program going with the Thai army which involved us paying the bills, or most of the bills, for the Thai army and for the Thai police to a lesser degree, to eradicate opium in the fields and at the same time to provide villagers with alternative crops, seed stock, saplings, this sort of thing and also to establish health facilities and so on. That was really what we did most of the time.

Added to that, this was a period when there was an awful lot of fighting between the Burmese army and the Karen, primarily insurgents, along the border. Because of our location we could monitor it much easier than could the guys at our embassy in Rangoon so even though it was really sort of internal for Rangoon, we did a lot of the reporting on it. With the troubles in Burma, in Rangoon particularly, in 1988 the Burmese students came to the border and established the All Burma Student Democratic Front, ABSDF. They were all strung out along the border there and it was much easier for us to get to them than anybody else so we did a lot of that too.

We also did a decent amount of refugee protection work. In northern Thailand when I was there in the consular district where we were, there was still a very large UNHCR operated camp that took care of Hmong refugees from Laos. They had been living there for years, along with some Meo and various other groups out of Laos. Along the Burma border there were a lot of refugee camps, sort of informal camps, taking care of the Karen refugees who came across from the fighting there.

Q: The Burmese were fighting the Karen?

GIBSON: Yes, the Karen and the Hmong while I was there but the Hmong tend to be a little further south, so the Hmong camps and the Hmong refugee areas were usually down south of my consular district so I never saw them.

Q: Were these both mountain type tribes wanting to stay out of the central government?

GIBSON: The Karen-Burma feud goes back to late 1948 and early 1949 right after independence when the Karen basically rose in revolt against the Burmese. They didn't want to be part of the new union of Burma as the Burmese gained independence in January of '48. In January of '49 after many months of preparation, the Karens in the army mutinied. There were many Karen units because the British had used the Karen extensively as soldiers. The mutiny wasn't countrywide because the Karen's weren't countrywide, but it was throughout the area of what is today the Karen State and up into the delta region of Burma, close to Rangoon. In fact Rangoon was almost captured by the Karen. The commander in chief of the armed forces in 1949 was a Karen. They were a military tradition tribe. Hill tribe I wouldn't say, but in Thailand they are hill tribes. The Karen tend to live in the hills there whereas in Burma they live throughout lowlands and highlands in a particular area. They are still fighting today but they are pretty well licked.

Q: Do we have any particular reason to support, or anything else, what was going on in Burma or were we out of it?

GIBSON: Our position was neutral. In fact I had instructions from the embassy that I was not to meet with Karen leaders or any other insurgent group leader. The idea was that we were totally neutral in it and that if I were to meet with Karen officials, it would give the Karen false hopes like we were somehow going to support them or something like that. At the same time, there are no secrets on the borders so the Burmese would find out and they would think that we were fooling around with the Karen. We very much kept them at arms length. I remember a couple times I ended up seeing Karen officials purely by fluke. I'd have an appointment with some Thai officials down at the border area and we'd meet at the coffee shop, walk in and have a couple of Karen's at the next table. I thought, oh shit, if the DCM finds this out he's going to lynch me. I made it very clear that I wasn't supposed to be talking to these guys, no hard feelings. Nothing ever came of it. I didn't bother telling the DCM. We tried to stay at arms length.

I'm all for human rights, don't get me wrong. I don't like bayoneting babies or napalming children, but our human rights policies have skewed. It is good to have human rights as an important aspect of our foreign policy but I'll give you an example of how screwed up it makes things in our policy. For example, none of us in our embassy could talk to Karen, Hmong, or any other insurgent group. After 1988 when the All Burma Student Democratic Front guys came down, took to the jungle with the expressed purpose of going into armed revolt against the Burmese government, they came down into the Karen area and into the Kareni area which was adjoining. They took up arms with military training. These guys were the darlings of the State Department and we just kept wanting to send money and humanitarian assistance, food, blankets, and all this sort of stuff, over to these guys on the grounds that they were the victims of this terrible Burmese government. I'll go along with the terrible Burmese government and all that sort of thing, but not a terrible Burmese government, a Burmese government that did different terrible things to the student demonstrators or any other demonstrators.

It was ridiculous. We could meet with the All Burma Student Democratic Front people. We could go to their camps and we could talk to them. That was perfectly fine because they were the darlings of the human rights people but the same foreign policy issues were brought up. Are we giving them false hope? Not really because we were giving them money and humanitarian aid. But on the other hand, what are we telling Rangoon? We are telling Rangoon that we are interfering in their internal affairs. To me it didn't make any sense at all and the human rights people kept saying "these are just refugees and victims." I kept sending in cables pointing out, in fact to the point where I got into trouble, that these guys are armed insurgents. They were insurgents from day one, that is why they came down to the border so they could operate an insurgency. At one point the DCM slapped my hands because I said that in a cable and disagreed with what the embassy had said. He was right. I should have done it a little more subtly.

Q: During this '89 to '92 period could you talk a little about your relations with the embassy? Who was the ambassador and the DCM and all?

GIBSON: We had two ambassadors. The first two years I was there it was Dan O'Donohue and the third year it was Dave Lambertson. Both good guys and both did right by me. Lambertson was much easier to work for than O'Donohue. Dan's a good guy, good sense of humor, but a micro manager, a nitpicker, and sort of a pain in the ass to work for.

Q: I could see but I think I would just as soon want him some outfit away from me.

GIBSON: Dave Lambertson is just the opposite. He is not a micro manager. He is much more laid back, much more prone to give his guys some rope and let them go out and do things. Just totally different managerial styles. The DCM for the whole time was Victor Tomseth who is now with the OSCE through the European bureau in Croatia. Victor was a great guy, at least when Dan was there, of soaking up the shit before it rolled far downhill. He was a real gentleman and a pleasure to work with.

I still remember one time when I sent my vice consul down to the border. He was a first tour junior officer, a great guy and we are still good friends. This must have been right after the elections in 1990 when the Burmese government wouldn't let the opposition take power. He was down there in the border area where they were all very pro-Karen and anti Burmese government and this sort of thing. He came back and wrote up his reporting cables. On one he recounted how people were asking him when is the United States going to intervene militarily? One scheme was to have the battleship Iowa come up to the mouth of the Rangoon River and shell Rangoon, paratroopers would go in and various things. So this was a little tongue and cheek cable. I taught him how to write these cables with one paragraph of what the news is, one paragraph with sort of behind the news stuff, and then the third paragraph with comments. For comments in this cable he writes, "Vice consul, unaccustomed to explain why the United States does not go to war with countries with whom we have diplomatic relations, declined to answer these questions." It was something like that. It was really cute.

I said "Jeffrey I can't send that in, O'Donohue will skin me alive. It is just too flip and too cute." He says, "Awe, come on boss, you've got to do it, you've got to do it." I said "Listen you little twit, I'll do it but you watch I'll get in trouble." Sure enough, boy did it hit the fan. Victor Tomseth calls me and he says on the phone, "Dick, the ambassador has asked me to call you about this cable you wrote. He says that the last paragraph" and Victor was chuckling as he was saying this, "that final paragraph is much too flip to have been sent out as a reporting cable to the Department and neighboring posts and everything." He chuckled a little bit and he says, "and the ambassador asked me to point that out to you." I forgot the term he used but anything, bring me up short on it basically like that, he says "There, now I've told you." Then he had a good laugh. This vice counsel was very clever with a good sense of humor and it was really a cute comment. I wish I could remember it. But, O'Donohue was upset over it but not overly. If he had been overly, I would have been in real trouble. So I told Jeffrey about the conversation and said "See, what did I tell you."

They were both fine people and I've seen them both once or twice since and this sort of thing. Victor Tomseth and I by the way are still friends.

Q: One of the things I would have thought would have been difficult would have been that with both the CIA and the DEA working on drugs and all, here you are the State Department, in a way you would have been presiding but not operating or something over this operation.

GIBSON: This is why I really fault O'Donohue. When I arrived in Thailand as I report into Bangkok on my way up to Chiang Mai for my welcome talk and meeting with the ambassador and so on, both he and the DCM made it very clear that the State Department lost control of the consulate up there. My predecessor was a very nice man, but both DEA and the CIA had cowboys up there and they would run circles around the guy and they just ignored him basically. It was very clear when you got up there that the consulate general was run by CIA and DEA, it was not being run by the State Department. The ambassador and DCM both told me that one of my highest priorities was to get control over the place.

I got up there and found myself having to deal with cowboys who would not recognize any sort of State Department role for any of this sort of stuff. They know what they are doing and I am just in their hair. We went round and round for the longest time. For example, there was one incident where DEA was building an addition on their own. On their own hook they just decided they were going to build an addition onto the house that they were using as an office and it violated FBO procedures and this sort of thing. The embassy told me to go and get the plans and the details from DEA and the DEA didn't want to give them to me. I explained and finally I got the papers and I sent them down but then they reported down to DEA that I basically strong-armed my way into their office and stole their documents and this sort of thing. There was just constant bull shit like this.

In fact the guys doing this were eventually finally both thrown out of the country because they were in a bar room argument with some other Western European type. They pulled out their revolvers and put them on the bar in sort of a threatening manner to end the argument type thing. So the boss there was actually thrown out of the country and so was one of his subordinates. These were the kind of clowns that I was dealing with.

Despite O'Donohue telling me, and Victor also, you've got to go shape them up, I got zero support from them. I mean zero. The minute anything happened, "Don't make waves. Don't make waves." Typical State Department that had the senior officer operation with the castration and they just would not back me up. It was ridiculous. It took me about two years and thanks to some personnel changes and me doing things which basically got me in trouble, but in the end I had control of the consulate. It was after about a year-and-a-half into my tour that the State Department was running the consulate again with basically almost no support from the front office which I really fault O'Donohue. That is the only thing I can fault him on. He basically gave me a big responsibility but no authority to carry it out and that left a bad taste.

Q: You said you did some things. I'm interested in the management side, how does one control these cowboys?

GIBSON: At first I basically tried to jolly along, cajole, and "oh come on guys, look we've got to do this because of this" and so on. This lasted for about six months. Actually the CIA guy, I guess they are sort of a different personality, refused to attend the first staff meeting when I got there. Okay. So I went over and saw him and I said, "Come on, let's figure out how we are going to work together." I sort of looked him in the eye and said here's how I'd like to do it. What do you think? We sort of got it hashed out. We had a pretty good working relationship after that.

The DEA guy, I played with him, I just chummied him along and jollied him along. I had known him years before briefly in Bangkok. For about six months jolly along worked and then Mel Levitsky, the INM guy, the drug guy, was coming out for a briefing. The ambassador and DCM of course, as I was handling his schedule up in Chiang Mai, wanted me to schedule a joint briefing with State, CIA, and DEA for Levitsky. The DEA said "No. We will give him a briefing privately but we won't participate in a joint briefing. If you and the CIA want to do it, go ahead." I said "Wait a minute, we've got to give him this and this is what the ambassador wants. They said "no", so I sent a cable down. I said "Look, somebody tell this guy to be a team player because I've cajoled, I've begged, I've pleaded and I've got nowhere with him." Did that get me in trouble because the ambassador didn't want to hear that. He doesn't work for me. He's the senior representative there of another U.S. government agency and I can't give him orders. There is absolutely no way I can. I can cajole and plead. Anyway, finally the ambassador because I guess he didn't want a problem with Levitsky said "Okay, do it." He told the DEA chief in Bangkok and the Bangkok guy told the guy up in Chiang Mai.

After that relations were really strained and the DEA guy refused to let any of his people talk to me without his clearance. If I had a question about narcotics or something, I couldn't find out. There was nothing I could do about it except I just kept working on him and said "OK, well let's have a meeting over at your place." I guess I'm getting this a little out of order. Early on I set up this process where we would have a weekly narcotics meeting, the three of us. One time at my place, one time at the Agency's place and one time at the DEA place. We would just rotate it around and we would sort of talk about what was going on. I always was an activist so I was always up around the border and I was always seeing things that these guys didn't have a clue was going on with the Wa, and Khun Sa's guys fighting. I always had something to contribute and this sort of thing. I had my own contacts so it was pretty much a shared thing. Even after DEA sort of declared war on me, I insisted that this committee keep going. We sort of kept in touch that way then it just went one incident after another. The guy had declared war on me and he had a reputation for being a very difficult guy and sure enough he was. Finally he got his ass kicked out of the country and things got a lot better at that point. The other thing that helped out...

Q: By the way how did this incident with the revolvers get back to the...

GIBSON: I happened to be out of the country. I was in Hong Kong with my wife or I was back in the States visiting my son, who was in school here or something like that. I've forgotten where I was. I guess what happened was, I think the guy was a Canadian, he went to the police. He called the police in and the police came. The DEA guy started swearing at the police and said, "You can't take us in. We are DEA" and so on, and so on. The police did take them in and took them down. Of course, then it got out into the press. I was gone and in fact by the time I got back both guys were gone. The ambassador finally moved kind of quickly. It was my view that if the ambassador had all along been giving a little support, this never would have come to this. Anyway I just sort of basically lucked out because they got transferred. Had they not been transferred I probably never would have gotten control of the consulate because I just couldn't do anything.

There were problems with DEA with things like housing board things. The consulate didn't have a housing board and we had 29 Americans up there. The housing decisions were made in Bangkok and DEA would get anything they wanted out of the Bangkok housing board because they had guys on it and they made sure it all happened. At the same time there were six air force guys there working with the Thai navy. We had a beautiful housing compound with very nice houses, a fence, it was good for kids, and all that sort of thing. The air force guys had always been shunted to the side and had never been allowed to be on the compound so they came to me and said "Is it possible for some of us to get on the compound? We've got kids and families." I said, "Yes."

So the next one that came open I said here is our proposal to the housing office. I guess what I had done, I had established a housing office for the consulate. Meanwhile there was a place coming open on the compound and what I did not realize is that the housing office in Bangkok before I had established my own housing office, had already assigned it to a single DEA secretary. It was a four bedroom house on a compound and the single secretary is ethnic Thai. I didn't know that and our housing board didn't know that because DEA didn't tell them so we tried to assign an air force family into it with three kids or something like that. That hit the fan. I made a stink over it. I said, "You can't do this. You're discriminating against people because they are enlisted people in the air force rather than high paid government employees. They are the ones with kids. This woman is an ethnic Thai. She can function quite well out on the economy in her own house." DEA said "Oh, it's security." Every time DEA didn't get what they wanted, they said it was a security issue. We're at risk up here. They are at about as much risk as I am walking down the street but that was their big pitch all the time. They won. Here again the embassy just wouldn't back us at all and here are the air force guys as second rate citizens again. We just had a constant series of incidents like this but fortunately the bad guys left. The others weren't so hard to get along with. It was just sort of the leader and one of his buddies that were the idiots.

Q: What was your impression of their effectiveness? The problem with cowboys being free agents running around doing things, often not speaking the language and all, (one always thinks of Oliver North and the White House) is they really are not being very effective. I am wondering, did you get any feel for how they were dealing with the drug situation?

GIBSON: Oh yeah, I know how they dealt with it. They worked through Thai police agencies. For example the DEA funded a company, maybe it was only a platoon, of Border Patrol Police and they had them up there in Chiang Mai. The police of course were working for their police bureaucracy hierarchy but the DEA funded and trained them and this sort of thing. They would go out on operations and try to intercept caravans as they were coming across the border and they would go after refineries. Basically it was DEA paying for and operating the intelligence net which located the refineries and then they would get together with the BPP guys, the Border Patrol Police, and then they would go out and hit the refinery. It was a cooperative thing. There is an office in Thailand which is sort of semi-modeled on McCaffrey's office, the drug czar, called the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, ONCB. The DEA guys would have a cooperative program with the ONCB guys especially on things like wire taps and intercept kinds of stuff. They would use the Thai technician and that sort of thing but they would pay for it. They had a lot of cooperatives, it was all done cooperatively.

The DEA guys were not authorized to go running around on their own and they couldn't really. They needed to work with the Thai police there. The general consent or the general view of the DEA guys as expressed to me, was that they didn't have much respect for the Thai police. They bad mouthed them an awful lot on grounds of corruption mainly. In fact towards the end of my tour there the successor as the DEA chief had such poor relations with the Thai police that he couldn't get an appointment to see them because he was constantly running off at the mouth about corruption and inefficiency. I don't want to say that it was racism but it was that attitude. It was our little brown brothers, they just can't do things as well as us DEA super guys. The Thai got tired of that and just basically cut off relations with them.

Basically I don't think the DEA was doing much good up there and I don't think that's necessarily a function of DEA, I just think that the problem is interdicting drugs. The most difficult way to enforce drug laws is to try to interdict them once it leaves the area where it has been produced because it can go in any way, shape or form. They would make occasional busts and that sort of thing but there is so much of it coming out that I don't consider interdiction a very effective way to go about the game. I think you do have to do it. You can't just give up, but that's not the way to do it.

Something we were doing, and this is where the CIA cooperate an awful lot, was poppy field eradication. The CIA had a photographic lab and all this sort of stuff in Chiang Mai and they worked very closely with the ONCB also, because the ONCB people sort of coordinated a program of poppy field elimination in northern Thailand with the army. That is what State did. We were paying for that operation which would cut down fields of poppy before they could be harvested. If you do that, you don't have to interdict which is like finding a needle in a haystack. You can find poppy fields if you've got an aerial platform that takes pictures. In this case it was an aircraft which actually the CIA operated. We would fly up there and turn the film over the ONCB. We'd do spot checks on our own but ONCB guys would plot all the fields and we would turn it over to the army. The army would get in their helicopters and chug along out there. We would all go out for an afternoon of cutting down poppy. It was hard work but it worked. It was much more effective in my mind than trying to find the needle in the haystack. DEA was working with the Thai police. I don't think they were particularly successful but I don't mean that as criticism. I don't think anyone could have been successful basically.

To give you an example to show you the poor state of relations between DEA and the police they were supposed to be working with up there, there is a great story which happened about two months before I left or something like that. I had great relations with the police. I had no problems. We read in the paper that a BPP, Border Patrol Police, checkpoint up near the Thai border had seized two Strelas, Soviet SA-7's or whatever, shoulder launched anti-aircraft missiles.

Q: Strela means "arrow" in Russian.

GIBSON: The first thing, we are on the phone. "Oh yeah, yeah, consul general come on up." They had brought the Strelas down to headquarters and we are sitting there copying down the serial numbers and all the markings we could find on them. We report all that back and we got the full story of how they did everything. We got back to the office and one of the CIA guys comes in and says "Hey Dick, can you get me in up there too?" "Yeah, yeah, bring your friend." The CIA went and did all the same thing so okay, great. Then DEA had their locals, their FSNs, phone the police. The police wouldn't let the DEA guys even look at it. And of course the Strelas were in route to Khun Sa who was into this big time drug trafficking, the "drug lord", prince of darkness, whatever. It showed that the Border Patrol Police wouldn't even talk to DEA. Relations were pretty bad and I don't think they were getting much better.

Q: Besides the drug business, were we looking at the politics of the area? You are shaking your head.

GIBSON: Nobody cared. I think there were two elections during the three years when I was there because there was a coup in-between. When the election would come around, we would all go start tromping around the countryside interviewing people trying to figure out who was going to win and we'd play a little prediction game. Actually we'd come out pretty close thanks to our Thai FSNs, no thanks to us. They would figure it out for us and we would duly report what they told us. They were pretty close. Then they would lose interest and nobody really cared.

Q: The political game was played in Bangkok anyway.

GIBSON: Yes, pretty much and in upcountry Thailand the way you get elected is you spread a lot of money around. It's no worse than the way our own system works probably but it is a little more blatant.

Q: Thailand during this period and I guess up to today and for a long time has been sort of THE vacation spot of Orientals and Europeans for sex. Did Chiang Mai get into any of this?

GIBSON: Oh yeah. One of the early things that I got interested in when I got there, and this young vice consul who I had who was a bachelor, was AIDS up there.

Q: AIDS being Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Basically it is a deadly disease and you get it, you die.

GIBSON: No one had done any reporting that we could see in the State Department so in late '89, I hadn't been there very long, my vice consul went off and he would go into brothels and ask "Are we using condoms in here today?" He would interview the girls, the owners and this sort of thing. The Thai are laid back you know. The guy's Thai was very good because he had been there as a foreign exchange student in high school. We were talking to doctors and everything. We get this picture of AIDS/HIV infection running high and it is scary, really scary. We are finding things like service workers, I think was the euphemism that is usually used for people, including those in massage parlor, outright brothels, or coffee shops where the girls would go home or go in the back room or down to the motel. You put all these guys together and something like, according to Thai officials in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai which were the two big tourist centers, two thirds of the women were infected with HIV.

We found out things about army recruits in northern Thailand. Northern Thailand had a much higher AIDS/HIV incidence than did the rest of the country for some reason. The Thai system of drafting young men into the military is you do it locally. They have local regions, they call them military circles, and they draft from within their provinces and then they train them there. (end side 1)

We were getting data from the army that showed that throughout the north in 1989, the year we were doing this, 11 percent of new draftees or people called in to be drafted, tested positive for HIV. In one province, Phayao Province, it was 17 percent. It was really scary stuff.

We sent a cable in which we also addressed some other parts of the country out of our consular district because we were getting things from the south and that sort of thing from these doctors and medical professionals. Anything that just concerned the north, we just sent. If it concerned any other part of the country, we sent it down to the embassy for clearance. We sent it down there and we sent it to Songkhla. Songkhla said fine. We sent it to Udorn and Udorn said fine. The political counselor at embassy Bangkok who is now one of our senior officers, he's DCM in Bangkok now, he spiked it. He said "You can't send this because it talks about all this other stuff out of your district. Nobody is interested in AIDS/HIV anyway." I said "Fine." I cut out the parts about the south, the northeast and anything about Bangkok because we just had a composite thing and then I just went ahead and sent it. The next day, or two days later, we got back a big attaboy from the Department of State explaining how they were really interested in this topic and how no one had been reporting on it and this sort of thing. Egg all over the political counselors face. I don't know what his problem was. We then proceeded to report about every six months or so on AIDS/HIV and it is really scary.

Part of the problem was the girls that go into these places are basically teenagers, they are young kids. In some cases, their parents sell them to recruiters that go through an area. In many cases they are basically shanghaied from Burma. They are hill tribe girls brought down from Burma. They hardly speak Thai. A lot of them are Shan and they speak Shan, which is similar to the northern Thai dialect, but it is not really good Thai. It is more like a local dialect in the north. It is perfectly good Shan. It is just they don't necessarily get along well. They are kept basically as prisoners in a lot of cases. These girls don't have a clue. They don't even know what AIDS/HIV is. The Thai men, and, as I'm told, Japanese men as well, (I'm not sure that is true any more) didn't like condoms and just wouldn't use them. You had all these young girls with basically no defense at all, they are prisoners basically, wage slaves, indentured servants, and they had not a clue. These drunken young Thai guys would come in and AIDS was really spreading. There was some homosexual transfer and there was some IV transfer, but most of it was through heterosexual sex. It was really a scary situation up there and we, of course, tried to tell any Americans we could get our hands on that if you go into these places you are crazy, but they did.

Q: Were you noticing deaths resulting from it?

GIBSON: No, not yet. No, and this was one of the things that, as one of the doctors up there told us, "You don't have to have an anti-AIDS campaign in Thailand in a couple of years because in a couple or three years everybody in northern Thailand is going to know somebody who has died of AIDS." It was that widespread. Of course, in Thailand, the health system just can't handle it. There were some people dying of AIDS already in the hospitals and their wards. We went in and saw some of them. Boy, that is a scary thing. But basically it was in the early stages. It was HIV, and it hadn't reached full blown AIDS yet but the doctors were saying in a few years people will be dying all over the place around here and our health system won't be able to take care of them. They are going to have to die at home. They are not going to be able to die in the hospitals.

Q: You've been back to Thailand. Did you see this happening?

GIBSON: I haven't looked into it. I have been back to Thailand doing research on this book I am working on. I don't have a clue. It has not come up in any of my conversations. I talk about drugs. I've seen in the news or read articles or something that the rate of increase in HIV infection in Thailand has gone down. The Thai public health people are pretty good and once they get energized on an issue, they usually start making progress. I am told that in the last few years, the rate of increase has declined. It is not as bad as it used to be and it is getting better but there are still an awful lot of people over there with HIV infections. I did notice in Bangkok walking around town that a couple of the massage parlors that used to be down in the Sukhumvit area are empty or torn down and something else has been built. I don't know if that is because people are getting smart or because the property value has gotten so high that they moved them out of town. I don't know which it was but I did notice a couple were no longer operating and they were great big multi-story buildings. It has not come up in any of my conversations.

Q: Other than the drugs and other things, were there any other things we might discuss about your time in Chiang Mai or did this pretty well occupy your time?

GIBSON: Yes, that pretty well occupied my time. I did a lot of time in a four wheel drive along the border basically monitoring the insurgency and the drug trafficking operations on the other side of the border. I spent a lot of time out with the Thai army cutting down opium fields and looking at assistance to villagers. I also spent a lot of time looking at the general economic development in the north, working with the royal project which the royal family sponsors for development programs for the hill tribes to get them away from poppy growing.

There is another active organization there sponsored by the Taiwanese government called the Free China Relief Association which has a whole lot of baggage with it in its history including supporting the KMT when they were in Burma and being an intelligence operation as well. At the same time they have done some very good development work and I spent a lot of time with those guys which is now paying dividends and giving me access to talk to the people I want to talk to for my book. I spent a lot of time going out looking at their projects, talking to people, and trying to figure out why did economic development come to a particular area. In other words, how are you going to spend your development dollar? Are you going to spend it for schools, or health, for new plants, new crops, roads, electricity, water? What are you going to spend it on? I learned an awful lot from that on which we duly reported. Whether anyone ever read it or not, who knows. Basically that was what I spent most of my time on.

I spent a lot of time at public ceremonies that you've got to go to. This is a Buddhist feast day so you've got to go give something to the monks. Okay, so my staff would hand me something and I'd go out there and hand it to them. They'd say you've got to go see the queen's sister who is up here, you've got to go give her some money. Okay, we'll give her some money. I was just led around by the nose by my Thai staff like most of us are for the protocol thing. You've got to do this, do that, so that took a lot of time. A lot of traveling around the north. We all traveled a lot.

Q: In your border excursions and all, were you picking up any feel for the Burmese situation, how the army was doing? What was happening in Burma during this '89 to '92 period?

GIBSON: Oh yes, anything along the border.

Q: What was your reading on the Burmese and their government?

GIBSON: That is an emotional issue and this is one of the problems with, I think, our foreign policy towards Burma as well as the activists and everything. I think that I am one of the few people around who try to take an objective middle of the road view on Burma. Our government policy is so screwed up toward Burma that it's a joke. We are totally a whipped dog by the human rights activists. There is nothing wrong with human rights, but we take Burma, which is a country where we have no interests basically, and we are really tough with them. We put economic embargoes on, and sanction this, and we bash them and beat them, and everything. Whereas what Hun Sen did in Cambodia a year-and-a-half ago or so ago, far outweighs that and we're not doing anything to Hun Sen. What the Chinese do far outweighs anything and the same is true with what the Indonesian government has done in Timor. You've got a reaction to Burma that it's a country that is not important to us so all of our grandstanding leaders get out there and knuckle under to "Let's Bash Burma Day". I think it is stupid. It's a self defeating policy. They don't understand the Burmese. The Burmese are the most stubborn people in the world and beating on them just makes them tougher. The way to win the Burmese over is with honey. You get a lot more flies with honey, etc.

On the other hand, clearly they are committing atrocities. Clearly the way they are treating the ethnic minorities inside of Burma is not good. Did I get a feel for what they do? Yes. They're press ganging corvee labor for porters for their army when their army is on operations against Karen, Palong, or Shan. Armies in Asia have done that forever. During the 1950s when Burma was under the democratic government of U Nu, the darling of the world's democrats and a fine man, a great man, the army press ganged civilians to act as corvee labor. That has always been that way. Living off the land, meaning fielding rice or appropriating rice from villagers, went on in the '50s. The Chinese operated that way. The Thai to a degree in the early days operated that way. That is how Southeast Asian armies were traditionally operated because there was no budget. Rangoon will send an army unit out in the field, give them a set of operating orders and give them a little bit of money to buy food and stuff with but not near enough. They are expected to live off the land basically.

The Burmese army is doing not nice things. All of these forced relocations you read about of villagers, Shan or Karen villagers, was exactly what we were doing in Vietnam with the strategic hamlet concept. The Burmese call it the strategy of the four cuts: you cut off this, you cut off that, you cut that. Basically what it is, you take an area that is heavily infested with the insurgents and you just move all the people out so there is nobody there to grow the rice for the insurgents, there is no place for them to hide, and the army can go after them. It is brutal and I'm not even sure that it's very effective but that is the way they operate. It didn't work for us in Vietnam. I don't know why it should work for the Burmese in Burma. We refuse to recognize why they are doing these things.

I can see all that happening and you can see it down on the border. You can watch them wage war against the Karen for example. Actually, the Burmese have a pretty good army. They know what they are doing. I'd watch battles. I'd go down on the bank of the Salween River and watch the fighting, watch the bodies floating down or I'd have been on the river and seen the bodies floating down. I'd watch the artillery barrages going back and forth. About three or four years ago I guess, the Karen really lost their last big strongholds along the border. The Burma army just built roads. They just kept building roads into the Karen areas. You build enough roads, you can get your troops in there and you can stay during the rainy season which you couldn't do before. It is a long slow process but it works. Now in the meantime are they making Joe citizen work for free on the road? They sure are and it's bad. Are they raping Joe citizen's daughter? Yeah, they probably are and that's bad too. They don't all do it but it depends on how much discipline and the quality of the officer that's there. You could see it all going on.

At the same time you could see the ineptness of the Natural Government of the Union of Burma, NGUB, which is the government in exile and some of Suu Kyi's people from the NLD, National League for Democracy.

Q: She's the one that won the Nobel Prize.

GIBSON: Right and her party won the 1990 elections fair and square and by all right she should be the prime minister of the country right now. Many of her supporters after the military crackdown ended up along the border. These guys we were also allowed to see because they weren't taking up arms, unlike the students. What a feckless and inept bunch of people, they are hopeless. They are ineffectual, totally unimpressive people. The army has basically eliminated everybody. The opposition has either been put in jail or they have co-opted them, bought them out. The ones like the NGUB, who are the foreign spokesmen government in exile, the cynics in Rangoon say "This is great because those guys are so inept that the world sees these guys as the representatives of Aung San Suu Kyi," which they aren't really. Aung San Suu Kyi is much better than any of these guys ever dreamed of being, but the Burmese say "Well fine, if that's what they want to think of the opposition, let them meet these guys." That's perhaps too cynical but it's sort of the attitude. We could see it all daily because we had this great contact all the time and the Thai had business over there. Some of them were loggers over there.

In fact the logging contracts come in for a lot of criticism by political activists, by environmentalists, and one group or another, quite rightly so. What happened was, starting in 1989 the Burmese figured the insurgents are cutting down all the trees and selling them to the Thai and making all the money. What Rangoon did, they figured we don't control those areas anyway but here's what we'll do Thai. We will grant you concessions and you will pay us royalties per log. You can go in and cut down these teak logs and bring them back out in the border area. We will send our forestry and customs people down to sort of monitor and you'll get letters of credit at the bank and we can check them up. The Burmese officials would be on the Thai side of the border because if they are on their side they would be shot by the insurgents.

The Thai lumber companies would pay off the insurgents. They are paying in Rangoon one hunk of money and then they are paying the Karen or the Shan or somebody another hunk of money, then they are going in and cutting them down and bringing the wood out. It is giving Rangoon money which they can then buy more guns with to suppress the insurgents. But also what it's doing is it's building a logging road system along the border which then if the Burmese can come hook into it with their army built roads, they can change the balance of power along the border, and they have. The Thai made a lot of money and the world lost a lot of very old teak trees and very young ones unfortunately. I guess you can argue, cut down the old ones that's okay, but they cut down the young ones too. A lot of corruption.

Q: In '92 where did you go?

GIBSON: I came back to Washington and I was sent to personnel in PER/CDA, Career Development Assignments.

Q: You did that from when to when?

GIBSON: From '92 to '94. It was PER/CDA/JO.

Q: Junior officers.

GIBSON: Yes. I was chief of the unit that did the assignments and the career counseling for all junior officers on their first two tours and going into the third tour.

Q: What was the situation because I was thinking it would be we were going through a lot of budget cuts and all of that?

GIBSON: That was a problem but a bigger problem was the fact that sometime well before I got there, like three or four years before (when I clean this up I will look back and I might be able to find it out of an old EER or something like that) the Department had changed the FAM.

Q: The Foreign Affairs Manual which is basically the operating instructions.

GIBSON: Right. They had changed the system and they had set by a certain date a new set of criteria. I've really got to go back and look on this. Basically what they had done, they had put in the FAM a new system for tenuring and promoting junior officers but then nobody had bothered to write up any procedures for it or to negotiate anything with AFSA or anything else. I got there one year from the time that all this was supposed to take effect and no one had done anything. So that was the biggest headache for me in that period. I let basically the other people on the staff handle the assignments and counseling largely. We divided the JO's up by alphabet groups and I had a very small alphabet group because I had other responsibilities. Basically I let the rest of the office handle the assignments for like new officers coming in, who gets to go where and this sort of thing. I let them broker deals amongst themselves and take care of that. I sort of had oversight and would break ties and settle disputes but I spent most of my time trying to figure out a new way to do junior officer commissioning and tenuring.

What we had to do was we had to first of all, within the broad personnel system, negotiate a new proposal. We came up with several proposals and many times we would kick it up and Genta Hawkins Holmes, the director general, would bounce it. She didn't like this or she didn't like that so we would go back and start over again. We ended up sending her up several choices. At the same time the lawyers were always in there. This was my only experience in life with State Department lawyers and my view of lawyers had always been that the policy makers should be able to go to lawyers and say "we want to do this, how can we do it?" The lawyer would say you can do it if you do this or that. Not our lawyers in personnel. You'd go to the lawyers who had the personnel account and they'd say "no, you can't do that." It was almost like the people in L who handled PER bureau wanted to make the policy so they were constantly putting up legal roadblocks for us. We were constantly having meetings to negotiate things. Then either L would bounce or Genta Hawkins Holmes would bounce or her deputy would bounce or somebody. After a long process we finally negotiated a revision to the FAM. I guess that was it. There had been a policy decision that we were going to do something different and then no one had ever put it into the FAM so we were writing the FAM.

Once the personnel bureau or the Department therefore agreed to a policy, we then had to negotiate with AFSA, the American Foreign Service Association, which is our union sort of. We had a labor management negotiator or a professional, and he headed the team. I was on the team and there was another officer on the team from personnel and we negotiated with AFSA. We negotiated through several sessions and various versions and by the time we had finished, AFSA had gutted most of what Genta Hawkins Holmes had agreed to. We ended up with sort of an uneasy compromise which I don't really recall it being very good at this point. That took up most of my time and as soon as I could get out of personnel, I did.

Q: In these negotiations were there any real issues of substance or was it more in form? Were there any real issues that you can think of?

GIBSON: I'll have to sit and sort of reflect and try to remember what the issues were. As much time as I spent on it, there were so many proposals out there that I'm really not sure which ones finally came down. We had really bizarre ones.

The issues were how do you cone an officer? That was it. The courts had ruled that our system of assigning a cone to an officer as they came into the service was illegal because there was no correlation between test scores or background or anything like that, and success in a particular cone, including the economic cone, by the way. The courts ruled that the system was bad so we had to get a replacement system by a certain date and no one had done anything about it. Then I arrived and was handed this mess.

The lawyers were terrified. They had lost the women's class action suit, they were in the process of losing the black officers' class action suit. They were just terrified of anything that they would have to really put any effort into because they figured they'd lose. We have a great bunch of lawyers who lose every case that they take on. It tells you something. Their solution was random. As new officers come in they were to pick a number or a computer assignment. It just went on and on. That was the lawyers way because then it would be totally free of bias or anything else. Genta Hawkins Holmes idea was to let them all chose whatever they want. We convinced her that if that was the case, you're not going to have any consular or admin officers, you're going to have all political and economic officers. We did a little informal polling and convinced her and she backed off of that. What we finally came up with was a system whereby they would come in unconed. When the courts ruled that you couldn't cone them on entry, they were coming in unconed.

At the end of the five year mark we had to commission them. When you commission them, you had to assign them to a cone. It had been four years and that first group that was going to get commissioned and coned was coming up and there was no procedure to commission and cone them. It's coming back now. The way we finally ended up doing it was that we brought the promotion panels into it kicking and screaming. They did not want that at all. I don't know if the system held up because it wasn't a very good system. None of us liked it. It was an awful compromise. What we did was when the officers were coming up due for their commissioning, we got a rank order of all junior officers who had been recommended for commissioning. There were x number of spots for political, x number for economic, x number for consular, x number for administrative. They all submitted their choice order (first, second, third, fourth) ranking then we would match a name against the list. Number one, you want to be an economic officer. Okay, you'd get it. By the time you got down to a certain level, people were going to start getting unhappy at some point along the line, but I think that is the way it ended up.

I think another proposal we had which got rejected, and I think my own approach to it was, we would take them in rank order. We had a way so that the top officer would be in one cone, the second officer would be in the other cone, the third officer would be in the other cone, and the fourth officer would be in another cone. This way you always had top grade as well as low grade performers in all four cones thinking that that's going to keep everybody happy. We tried all different systems like that but in the end it came down to just a straight rank order and you get to pick your cone. I don't think that lasted. We all saw it at the time.

Q: It would tend to put basically your best people...

GIBSON: Not the best people but the people who got the best EERs. There is a big difference there.

Q: Absolutely but that would tend to perpetuate you might say the class difference, the social class difference or whatever you want to call it, between political top, economic kind of a secondary but they are in trade kind of type thing, and then consular and admin down, these are people that have to do things.

GIBSON: That's right. The approach I liked, and I forgot the exact system that we had worked out, was I think we'd take say 100 officers and we'd rank the 100 officers and take the first 25, second 25, the third and fourth. We'd separate all the 25s out and then we would make the top 25 all select one of the four cones but we would ration the number of slots in each cone available to that top 25 officers so that some of that top 25 went to every cone. Then we would take the next tranche down and that's how we wanted it. We were trying to get rid of that class distinction. It didn't work.

Q: What was your impression during this '92 to '94 period of the incoming officers?

GIBSON: Some of them were quite good. Some of them I could not understand why we were bringing them in. We had too many lawyers basically, they are not necessarily good officers.

Q: Lawyers are not, I'm speaking as a retired Foreign Service officer and lawyers are not a particularly good recruiting ground.

GIBSON: Some of our classes would have 25 percent of people who had law degrees. We had a lot of people as second career. I don't mind that because when I came in most of them were right out of college and I'm not sure that is a good idea. I think we need people out there with wide experience. You'd get retired lieutenant colonels. Okay, he did his 20 years and retired as a lieutenant colonel. Back in those years that still wasn't a very good performance. This person did not perform very well in the military. If he had been a good performer he would have been a colonel especially if you were in a line as opposed to a support. He is coming in again, starting all over and what's his motivation?

Q: Nowhere to go because of age essentially.

GIBSON: There had been ruling that we could no longer discriminate on age as a result of a law case, another one that our lawyers lost. I remember we took in this one woman, this was a particularly perplexing thing, a very nice lady. I just liked her personally. Under the rules for tenuring and commissioning we had to give everyone a chance to get off language probation so we had to train this lady in Spanish which was the easiest language we could find to train her in. Let's face it, as we get older, you and I know that you don't learn languages like you do when you are a kid. This woman had time for two assignments before she hit 60 and mandatory retirement. Why we brought in someone like that and wasted taxpayers money and resources when we could have been bringing in somebody who was, say, 28 and with a whole career ahead, I couldn't believe it.

Anyway, I found the officers a very mixed bag. Some of them were excellent and some of them I subsequently saw and they are terrifically good officers. Others are really pretty poor performers. One thing my colleagues and I all know is that, (maybe it was because we were all the dinosaurs and the old guys, we had come in during the Vietnam years and most of us were vets,) except for a few retired guys coming in the second time, none of these guys had any military experience at all. Maybe it was because we had been vets, maybe we had been through a war, maybe because we were overly patriotic and we really believed in public service and we really believed that one of the highest callings you could have in the United States was to be with the government be it military or be it civilian, working helping people, helping the country and that sort of thing, a sense of public service. It is absolutely gone. This is something that we all would sit back and just shake our heads over, all of us older guys. This was something which you can't blame on the junior officers. It is probably a reflection of society more than anything else. It is really discouraging. I didn't have a real high opinion of most of them.

Q: How did this manifest itself, this lack of...?

GIBSON: We'd have bull sessions and sit around with a brown bag lunch. "Why did you come in?" "Because I want to travel." Or "The money's pretty good. It was more than I was making as a teacher." "I want to learn a trade." Nowhere did public service come up and you could see it as you'd start talking to them about their assignment. "Now where do you want to go?" "What's going to get me to the top?" Very ambitious. The naked ambition of the junior officers that we were bringing in was astounding. When we came in there were some really ambitious people but they hid it. When we all came in, the consensus was whatever job you do, if you do it well you will get promoted, you will be rewarded. Now because the system has changed and the perception was, and I think quite rightly so, to get ahead you've got to have the right jobs.

We had officers that didn't want to go overseas. "You can't send me overseas." "Yes we can. We are required to. The regulations say that one of your first two assignments must be overseas." "No, I don't want to go overseas." I've got a heart murmur, or I've got asthma, or I've got this, or I don't want to go there, I want to go to London. It was very difficult to deal with that sort of thing whereas when I came in, I would say, "Where are you going to send me? Oh, you're going send me there. Okay. Sure. It's not my first choice but I might as well go and try it out." Not these guys. There were a few that liked the hardship idea but most of them wanted the cushier job or they didn't want to go overseas at all, they wanted to be staffers on the seventh floor. It was all figured out how you get ahead. It's a commentary on how the Foreign Service has changed and quite frankly at the end of two years in personnel, I knew that I wanted out.

Q: Did you notice any difference between the attitude, the performance, the expectations of the women coming in and the men at that point?

GIBSON: The only thing I noticed was the women were probably marginally more aggressive. I won't say marginally, they were more aggressive than the men. They were much more prone to naked ambition or demonstrating it than were the men. The men were still a little better at hiding some of it but the women were by and large much more determined. Maybe that is a reflection on society too, I don't know.

Q: What about the minorities, was this an issue or not?

GIBSON: Oh yeah it was an issue and we had a woman, a civil servant GS officer in CDA, whose job was to shepherd these guys and girls around and make sure that they weren't getting screwed by the system. I think by and large it was working well. I think we were by and large getting good minorities, not totally. Of course there are always the ones that weren't suited for the work and it was always because of racism, it wasn't because they weren't suited for the work. Most of them I think were pretty good officers that we were bringing in. We weren't bringing in all that many. There were some Hispanics and some blacks and some Asians but not in big numbers. We were bringing in a lot better quality of minority officers than we were before. In my previous session we talked about my brief experience, my four months killing time on the Board of Examiners when we were getting the results of the people who had come in under the system of bypassing the exam system. They would bring these people in for five years then bring them up for review on whether they should be tenured or not. We had some real losers in that crop. I think bringing them in through the exam system was the way to do it. You might get fewer than you might otherwise want because the smart guys are going to go off to work for GM or something. They were pretty good.

Q: Was there any special care taken for first assignments for a minority officer?

GIBSON: Not on my watch. I tried to make our system as color blind as I could. You can say that is bad because some people we say we've got to give these people more of what they want. I would say that is not helping them. What you have to do is just treat everybody equal. Basically when we made the assignments, I would check over all assignments. I tried not to know who on the assignment list was black, who was white, who was Hispanic and whatever. I always made a point of asking why are we assigning Ms. Jones here? I never heard we are assigning Ms. Jones because Ms. Jones is black and wants to go there. It was Ms. Jones is being assigned for very good reasons and Mr. Smith over here is going for very good reasons. No, we didn't while I was there. Maybe some would argue that I should have, I don't know but we didn't.

Q: You left in '94, what then?

GIBSON: I came over here to this wonderful campus and studied the six week economic course because I always wanted to take it. Then I did some refresher Japanese language training here and in January of '95 I went out to Yokohama for more refresher Japanese language training. In the summer of '95 I left Yokohama and went to Sapporo Japan as principal officer up there and stayed there until December of '96 when I decided that it was time for me to do something else with my life and quit. I am one of the few white male O1 political officers who quit rather than had their clock run out.

Q: Tell me about Sapporo. To identify it, it's the principal city of Hokkaido isn't it?

GIBSON: Yes, it's the principal city of Hokkaido. It is where the Hokkaido administrative apparatus is. It is like the capital. The consular district included the northern part of Honshu as well. I think the consular district was something like 27 percent of the land area of Japan or something like that. It is quite extensive, quite large. Hokkaido was an interesting place. I think it has 22 percent of the land area of Japan and it's got something like five percent of the population. It is thinly populated with beautiful forests. It is actually a beautiful country. Dairy farming and fishing are big up there. Coal mining is gone now. It is mainly agriculture. Some of it is rice because they grow rice everywhere in Japan but there are a lot of potatoes and onions and sort of western crops are grown there plus it is a big dairy area, the dairy capital of Japan. It's like our Wisconsin.

Q: What were the issues? What was the situation there when you were there?

GIBSON: It was all pretty calm and easy, kind of boring. It was actually the most boring job that I had in the Foreign Service. We had a beautiful facility occupied one half by the USIS branch office and we had the other half. Actually USIS had most of the building because they had an auditorium, library and that sort of thing. It was a very nice facility. Then there was us. The USIS thing got closed down after I left actually.

The main job that we had on the State side was trade promotion and that was basically our job. Our military would go up there and we'd do exercises with the Japanese self defense forces and that sort of thing. Every now and then there would be an incident up on the disputed area between Japan and Russia which we'd report on. We would also report a little bit on far eastern Russian developments, trade relations with Japan. Basically it was trade promotion. We were helping U.S. companies selling to Japanese companies. Our biggest market was building materials. In Hokkaido, because they had more space, there tended to be more western style homes built and two-by-four construction as opposed to post and beam construction which the Japanese had traditionally used.

Q: This is tape five, side one with Dick Gibson.

GIBSON: Oregon, Washington and the Canadians too were selling a lot in there and so were the Swedes and various Scandinavians. The Australians were making a good effort too. Throughout northern Japan, northern Honshu and on Hokkaido, as I said two-by-four style construction was flourishing and our companies would sell better quality building materials shipped from the west coast to Japan and we could beat local Japanese prices.

Q: Did you have problems with Japanese regulations, custom, I mean a concerted effort to make sure that nothing got through?

GIBSON: That's right we did but you just keep plugging away at it. Tokyo was handling most of that. Tokyo was fighting that battle. All we were doing was we were cheering Tokyo on and if we got a particularly egregious case we would report it to the embassy and then they would use it in their negotiations with the Japanese. Certain things we were doing okay in and certain things we weren't. Wiring and plumbing, forget it. They had that one sewed up. The Japanese had all these little regulations on wiring and plumbing and stuff.

Q: You can draw up things so that you only have to use certain types of piping and wiring.

GIBSON: We were chipping away at it. We were doing real well on stuff like timber and on things like drywall, fiberboard, basic construction materials. Yes, it all had to be passed and this and that and everything. You know, you beat on the Japanese long enough, they give grudgingly with two steps forward, one step back but then you just keep pounding on them. We were working at it.

I think what we were trying to do was get a U.S. share of major construction projects. The biggest one that was going on there was the city of Sapporo was building a new stadium for the World Cup in 2000 or whatever it was going to be. We knew it was an uphill fight but we did a lot of lobbying with Sapporo officials and everything to get American companies to get a good shot at it. We knew we wouldn't get an American contractor in there, that would never happen. But we were working very hard to get an American engineering firm to have a role in there. As I understand after I left it came down that way. It started out as an American engineering firm and I think the Brits bought it out but it is still largely American in many ways I guess.

We were also doing pretty well in selling electricity producing things like generators and that sort of thing to the local electric companies because the utilities in Japan are under increasing pressure to become more cost effective and so they were looking for better ways to do it. We were having some success in that area and we were having some success with computer and high tech stuff. Other things surprisingly enough were helicopters. The various prefectures in Japan and major cities were on the kick of buying emergency helicopters, rescue helicopters for medics and that sort of thing. We had some pretty good luck selling Bell helicopters to the city of Sapporo and the province, state, whatever you want to call it, of Hokkaido and some of the other cities down in the northern Honshu area. But that is basically what we did. I spent a lot of my time doing trade shows. We would do trade shows both in Sapporo and in Sendi which is the commercial center of northeastern Japan, the Tohoku area they call it. We were doing okay. We did pretty well. I was quite please with the performance of the guys doing that but basically that was all we did. No one cared about anything else up there.

Q: What about with trade and all, I would have thought that Wisconsin or Minnesota, you mentioned dairy, might be pretty good sending trade delegations there and all of that or maybe Idaho potatoes or something like that?

GIBSON: We got strawberries but not potatoes because Hokkaido grew plenty of potatoes and quite good ones. Wisconsin didn't participate. You take dairy farming at their own place, there is no way you can beat them.

Q: I was thinking of equipment or something like that.

GIBSON: Oh yeah, the dairy farming equipment, milking equipment and a lot of that stuff was American, very heavily American made stuff was there. But you know it is funny because I guess what was going on is the dairy industry in Hokkaido was consolidating while I was there and a lot of people were selling their farms and there were fewer and fewer farms and this sort of thing. Mom and dad would retire and Sally and Joey didn't want to be on the farm, they wanted to be in the city and they had left. When I would visit dairy farms you would see American milking equipment and various other things which I've sort of forgotten because I don't know anything about farming anyway. There would be Ford tractors and all this stuff. You would see a lot of American made equipment but we weren't at the time really engaged in selling them which told me that it was sort of a maintenance job. There was a local Ford rep. It had sort of gone on its own and it didn't really need any consulate intervention, trade boost and this sort of thing. I think that it was probably because it was a very stable market, or a shrinking market if anything. You are right. Our stuff was being used over there.

Q: When was the last time that you were in Japan?

GIBSON: Last month.

Q: No, I'm talking about a tour before this?

GIBSON: It had been '86 (if you count language school) to '89 in Okinawa.

Q: Did you notice any change in the Japanese? Up in that area were they more internationally oriented? Was there a change?

GIBSON: First of all I can't really say if there was a change and I'll tell you why. Okinawans are Okinawans, they are not mainland Japanese. Hokkaido people are not your average Japanese because Hokkaido is settled. It was a frontier area as late as the turn of the century so the people who went up to Hokkaido came from all parts of Japan so they are much more open and less closed than the people from the main islands of Japan. They are not really representative of the Japanese either. I found the Hokkaido folks in general to be much more open, easier to talk to. Not easy but easier than most Japanese. Yes there is a very high interest in international things like music festivals, and Sapporo is building a world trade center. They would have exchanges with the Northern (tier) Group, countries that basically are at the top of the world.

Q: Kind of cold.

GIBSON: Yeah, kind of cold, the Scandinavian countries, Russia, Canada, U.S. through Alaska. They are constantly having meetings and conferences. Hokkaido and Sapporo are really good on dragging in international things. At the universities there they have a lot of sister school relationships with U.S., Australian, Russian, Chinese universities. Sister city programs are very popular. All of this, as there is toing and froing and this sort of thing, and does it make a real impact on the psyche of the average Japanese citizen in Hokkaido? No. They go through all the motions and everything, they are doing all this. My friends and I, the cynics that we are, we would always say the Japanese wouldn't know kokusaika if it bit them in the ankle. Kokusaika is the Japanese term for internationalization. They don't get it but they are trying real hard.

They had a program in Japan called JET program, I think it means Japan English Teaching or something like that. It is a government sponsored thing. Young Americans or other nationalities too go to Japan and some of them teach English in the schools and some of them they put in the city or the provincial administrative offices and they handle these international programs. In every province, (I use the term province. It's multidimensional, they are not even all the same in Japan but they are province like things for cities and all the major cities) they all have international programs and in the city there will be an international department. You know how exploded the bureaucracy in Japan is, so they've got all this tax money and they sponsor these. A great many of them have these foreign kids there. You meet some real nice young Americans, I met mainly Americans of course. Anyway they are very interested and the people of Hokkaido more so than most I think.

Hokkaido is basically a colony of mainland Japan. The Japanese sort of see them as the provider of milk, cheese, potatoes, onions and a market for their manufactured goods and this sort of thing. Very few Japanese companies will go up there and locate. The Hokkaido crowd are always trying to get foreign companies to come and invest in Hokkaido but they won't because transportation costs between the mainland and Hokkaido are prohibitive. The government regulates everything and won't give a break on airline fares, telephone calls. They won't give them a break on anything so they pay outlandish fees.

I'll give you an example of internal transportation and why factories won't locate in Hokkaido. You can ship a standard sea-land container of goods from say to Seattle to Yokohama Japan for x number of dollars. At Yokohama you put it on a ship to bring it up to a port in Hokkaido on the Pacific coast, we're not talking about the Sea of Japan side, we're talking about the Pacific coast. It will be 2x dollars. It will cost you twice as much to ship it internally and if you try to do it by road, it is going to be the same thing.

I used to love the internal phone thing. My wife was over here in the States while I was there, that was one of the reasons that I didn't do the full tour. I would call her, as I did most nights. The embassy has this tie line back to this area so once I got to the embassy operator my telephone call to Virginia was free but the thing that limited our phone conversations was I had to pay the phone bill between Sapporo and Tokyo. It wasn't quite as bad as her calling me direct from here but it wasn't much cheaper. It was cheaper but not much. Anyway, nobody wants to locate up in Hokkaido and the Hokkaidan people are always pressuring the government to give them a break on this or that. Everything is regulated so if the government bureaucrats want to, they could make the long distance rates cheaper. It gets in the way of telegraph, e-mail, it affects everything up there.

Q: Did the dispute over the northern territory with what used to be the Soviet Union and is now Russia, intrude at all?

GIBSON: No, occasionally. The Japanese poached a lot in those islands. Their fishermen would go up there and start poaching and the Russians don't mess around. A patrol boat would go in and warn them a couple of times and if they didn't smartly get out of the waters or heave to for arrest, they'd shoot them. They would just open fire. There were a couple incidents where machine gun holes in the cabin and this sort of thing and boats would be arrested. In every case the Japanese were in the wrong. The Russians were in the right in the sense that they were protecting their territorial limits. You may not agree with their territorial limits because you may say that that's an island that really belongs to Japan, but not so. The islands we're talking about are right here where they've got a sort of hatch there. They would be around usually right around in this area just off Hokkaido. But sometimes they would be up here off Sakhalin and Sakhalin is not disputed. The Japanese were poaching. There would be occasional incidents but it would always be played down.

If you went up to that area of Hokkaido, the We Want Our Northern Territories Back movement or whatever, was really strong. They have museums there and they have road signs along the road which the Japanese right wing would have up showing basically Russian soldiers bayoneting nice Japanese babies on the islands, that sort of thing. It was really just funny propaganda. I used to take snapshots of the big signboards. You get away from there and nobody much cares, it's a dead issue. They are god forsaken islands and who wants them? At the museum they have a lot of historical photographs of Japanese families and workers. There is nothing up there. They are barren, cold, isolated and nobody in their right mind lives there. In fact the population has drained because once the Soviet Union broke down, the Russians don't have to stay there any more and they are heading back. There have been some earthquakes that have destroyed a lot. Nobody wants to live there, even the Russians don't want to live there, and there are no Japanese left there. They all were sent back down to the mainland and so nobody really cares except for these old codgers up there, the right wing.

A few years ago the Russians and the Japanese agreed to a system whereby several times a year without bothering with visas and everything, the Japanese can go up there and visit the ancestral graves. That took a lot of the wind out of it too. I think it is sort of the thing, oh yeah well great grandfather Hashimoto he is buried up there. That is great, you stay there Hashimoto-San and I'll stay down on Hokkaido where it's a lot nicer. It was a big Cold War issue at one point.

Q: It was a very handy thing for the old Cold War. It kept the Japanese from playing footsie with the Soviets. It was stupidity on the part of the Soviets but anyway it was their stupidity and not ours.

GIBSON: What is interesting now is if you took a poll in Hokkaido, 90 percent of the people in Hokkaido would say let Japanese businesses invest in those islands because there are plenty of Japanese businesses that would like to invest in construction on those islands or in a fish canning processing plants and this sort of a thing. They see it as an opportunity for some profit but the Foreign Ministry won't let them because if the Japanese invest there, they have to get Russian permission which implies that it is Russian territory, and so on, and so on. The Hokkaidans are always pounding on Tokyo to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying hey, forget that let's just do a deal, but Tokyo won't do it. The people of Hokkaido they don't care.

Q: You retired in '96. Could you just give me a brief idea of what you've been up to since then?

GIBSON: I retired and immediately, didn't miss a pay period, went to work half time for a drug policy think tank in Washington D.C. I did that through '97 and a little bit into this year. I did two six month contracts with them. The project I was working on was starting up some sort of a drug prevention education pilot project in Burma. The final thing after we got it I was negotiating it, we got it all arranged and everything, the potential funders in the United States backed out, so that is finished. I've done three stints with the OSCE, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as an election monitor, twice in Bosnia and once in Armenia. I've been working on my book. I am writing a book on the KMT armies, the former nationalist Chinese armies that went into Burma as you know. Starting August 1, I am going over for a six month contract with OSCE to Croatia and I am going to head up one of their field offices there in the eastern Slovenia area. I find retirement very pleasant. I work just enough to earn a few extra bucks and retirement gives me the opportunity to do things that are fun. I've managed to keep doing things that give me travel abroad. I only regret that I didn't retire a little sooner.

End of interview